
Afterall

A Journal of Art,
Context and Enquiry

Arahmaiani

Tania Bruguera

Inji Efflatoun

Chiang Mai Social Installation



Autumn/Winter 2016
US \$15 - CAN \$18



Arahmaiani, *Free Market*
Indonesia, 2008, detail.
Courtesy the artist and
Tyler Rollins Fine Art,
New York

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Foreword

– Stephanie Smith

Recently a group of artists, academics, curators and activists gathered in the north of England at the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (mima) to discuss the possible futures of Arte Útil.¹ A concept and set of working practices initiated by the artist Tania Bruguera, Arte Útil proposes that art can be directly useful as a tool for social and political change. One moment from this summit feels especially relevant to this issue of *Afterall*. It occurred during a discussion of the Arte Útil archive, itself an evolving compendium of global projects that fall within the concept's rubric. To date, the archive has taken various forms, from an online database to physical presentations within museum exhibitions – fairly effective ways to convey the purpose and potential of Arte Útil to a dispersed audience, but nonetheless fraught. Unlike other forms of art, even other forms of socially engaged or political art, Arte Útil is always meant to move beyond the realm of the symbolic and into the space of action. This, of course, poses an explicit challenge to the inherited conventions of art institutions. Addressing this, at one point mima director Alistair Hudson noted that 'whenever the Arte Útil archive becomes a display mechanism or orthodoxy it dies. We lose the argument.'

This tension, between art's established modes of engagement and an impetus towards alternative forms of action, appears repeatedly across the coming pages. Walter Benjamin, in conversation with David Morris, goes so far as to claim that 'art', as we know it, is obsolete, which chimes with Bruguera's emphasis on social transformation over more traditional artistic concerns. In a wide-ranging conversation with W.J.T. Mitchell, Bruguera discusses the development of Arte Útil; and John Byrne offers an astute analysis of the broader movement around it, from grass-roots community organising to international art museums, and the issues Arte Útil must grapple with as it continues to evolve.

Many texts in this issue address the possibilities and limits of cultural institutions – museums, libraries, archives – as imperfect stewards for conflicted objects and charged histories. They are places that preserve and dismantle, conceal and reveal. Structured in the form of an associational glossary, Charles Stankievecch's account of counterintelligence touches upon the agency of objects, the ways that they can hide and be hidden within various forms of camouflage, including the cover provided by institutional norms. Helena Vilalta's nuanced assessment of the recent exhibition 'Empty Fields' at SALT Galata, Istanbul addresses archival procedures as having the potential for a kind of heroism, where archival gestures offer a means to preserve vulnerable cultures during times of conflict. Sometimes conflict wins out, preservation is effaced. The task then becomes one of calling attention to absence, and to the implications of that absence – questions that Vilalta explores in relation to the political erasure of the Armenian genocide. Georgina Jackson's text elaborates on the artist Abbas Akhavan's profoundly beautiful project *Study for a Monument* (2013–15), which draws inspiration from a selection of plant pressings from Iraq, reimagining and reactivating those archival samples in relation to urgent contemporary questions about trauma, evidence and empathy. Anders Kreuger's critique of a recent exhibition of Gely Korzhev addresses the recuperation of Socialist Realism within Russia, while Peter Osborne traces how the alternative art practice of Ilya Kabakov both shaped and was shaped by Western art categories. In different ways, then, all of these texts address how objects slip in and out of our ability to apprehend them. Meanings and details flex in relation to context, inflected in some cases by the capacity of the institution to hide away or preserve ideas and artefacts. Once revealed again, we can attend to their beauty and power – or even their banality – in ways that activate our critical imagination.

This is encapsulated in a different sense by the performances of the Indonesian artist Arahmaiani. She chooses to make the self, as body or as object, visible within her art. As

1 'Arte Útil Summit 2016', Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, 22–25 July 2016. See <http://www.arte-util.org/studies/arte-util-summit-2016/> (last accessed on 18 August 2016).

Wulan Dirgantoro argues, Arahmaiani's choices function both by defying the categories imposed by Western critics and museums, and, as Angela Dimitrakaki points out, through her exposure of the biopolitical complex of capitalism, religion and patriarchy. Arahmaiani also participated in Chiang Mai Social Installation, a series of artist-led festivals in Thailand that attempted to bring art into the social fabric of its host city – introduced here in an essay by Simon Soon. The festival coincided with the rapid spread of globalisation during the 1990s. It was at this moment, when the festival was at the peak of its success, that the organisers chose to withdraw. Its activation of the local as a rejection of the then-emergent global art field resonates like a site-specific Arahmaiani performance writ large. Arahmaiani also represents a sustained practice of art-as-resistance. Her brief imprisonment by the Indonesian military government in the 1980s might make one think of Bruguera's well-known antagonisms towards the Cuban state, and it is a point of commonality with the Egyptian artist Inji Efflatoun. Efflatoun too was imprisoned by authorities for her rebellious political stance. As essays by Anneka Lenssen and Kaelen Wilson-Goldie show, her practice suggests a lifelong ethics that plays itself out through personal and political life, as a celebrated artist and leader in the Egyptian women's movement. Conversely, through an engagement with the final photographs of the British artist Jo Spence, Anne Boyer addresses such questions within a moment of vulnerability and sickness. What kind of activism, what kind of art is possible at the limits of life?

As with every edition of *Afterall*, this issue is a collective endeavour. It also reflects the journal's evolving aim to connect ongoing research across dispersed constituencies. As well as its long-established partnership with M HKA in Antwerp, the journal is building new relationships in Toronto via its research partnership with the University of Toronto and the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) – two institutions that, like those discussed on these pages, are full of contradictions and potentialities that we hope to activate. For a journal co-founded by Mark Lewis, a London-based but Canadian-born artist, it might be tempting to read this as a foreseeable kind of homecoming. But this grounding in Toronto goes deeper. It also feels generative because Canada is, as they say, having a moment. Despite its flaws, it is arguably one of the more stable and open democracies in the world right now. That's precious at a time when so many long-standing civil societies are become less civil, more fraught. Canada is also a place where questions of decolonisation – another thread through this issue of *Afterall* – are very much a part of the cultural conversation. One key topic is the question of how to indigenise institutions – a discourse that raises questions about how we treat each other, how we might activate objects and ideas to generate new forms of creativity, critical thinking and active listening. *Afterall's* editorial team began to address these matters this past spring in Toronto, in conversation with a group of scholars, artists and activists including indigenous leaders. Those conversations were shaped by Charles Stankieveh and Wanda Nanibush. Nanibush has recently joined the AGO as Assistant Curator for Indigenous and Canadian Art, and will now join Stankieveh as one of the journal's two contributing editors from Toronto as we carry these discussions forward. They will be important as we continue to think about art's many roles in the world right now, its many uses and our possible futures.



The Kind of Pictures She Would Have Taken: Jo Spence

– Anne Boyer

In Terry Dennett's 1992 portrait of Jo Spence in her hospice bed, Spence – whose photographs often depict her own robust, middle-aged, working-class body – is gaunt, big-eyed, dressed in a hospital gown, covered by a simple patchwork quilt and propped up on pillows. She does not, as she did in so many of her self-portraits, play. She stares straight into the camera, skeletal. The way she looks is a surprise.

This photo, which Dennett describes as having been taken on a 'good day' shortly before Spence's death,¹ startles because the Jo Spence in it looks almost nothing like Jo Spence, or at least the Jo Spence available through her photographs, the one who called herself a 'cultural

sniper', ready to take on the upper classes, wearing pantyhose as a mask, holding a slingshot, large and naked and covered in black and red war paint. Spence, who had documented her own image through a politicised mode of self-portraiture she

Anne Boyer sees the beginnings of a collective politics of care in Jo Spence's *Final Project*.

called 'phototherapy', seems to have turned into someone else without warning, leaving no photographic record that would bridge the gap between Spence the sniper and Spence the terminal cancer patient. This is because Spence, as she was dying of leukaemia, no longer wanted to appear in her own work.²

Spence's *Final Project* (1991–92) – made up of 'post-reality' still lifes and layered photographs from her archives – are, according to Dennett, 'the kind of pictures she would have taken' if she had been well enough to do so.³ These photographs include studies of self-care (her 'survival programme') and phototherapeutic investigations of death. If these works contain her face, they do so by reintroducing earlier images of it and layering them with images suggestive of decay; and sometimes, instead of putting herself in the picture, Spence puts in a skeleton.

Skeletons are iconographic euphemisms. They aren't like corpses: they don't rot or smell. Unlike corpses, skeletons are not – at least as they appear in the symbolic vernacular – differentiated by the historical and social details of cause of death or manner of burial. Unlike a living body that is sometimes mutilated by disease or work or wear, a skeleton often retains the integrity, too, of being fully limbed, intact and seemingly mobile, with a jointed pliability that makes it appear ready at any moment to reanimate. Skeletons are easy and anonymous, at least compared to people in all their wounded particulars. Spence's pre-leukaemia work, most notably that which she exhibited after her diagnosis of breast cancer in projects like *Cancer Shock* (1982) and *The Picture of Health?* (1982–86), was all about these wounded particulars.

Altered by surgery, showing all the fluctuations in weight of a self-described 'emotional eater', written on in surgeon's ink or its imitation, with X's to mark potential amputation, or with questions, like the one she wrote above her breast – 'Property of Jo Spence?' – Spence's body was a document inscribed by the conditions under which she lived. She was often naked in these photographs, her breasts exposed. But in the late work, what-would-be-Spence-but-is-now-a-skeleton – holding a camera against a bony, fleshless chest – is missing almost everything. There are no breasts, no wounds, no weight, no gender, no class, no words (like 'Monster') written across skin: there's no skin left to write on. The skeleton, then, serves as a double thing; as a symbol of death as usual, but also as reminder of a specific identity's

1 Jo Spence, *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression* (ed. Jo Stanley), London: Routledge, 1995, p.227.

2 'Leukaemia proved a difficult illness to depict. She did not look ill in the early stages, just pale and interesting, she remarked. Two attempts to photograph herself in the graveyard resulted in emotional upset and discarded pictures.' Terry Dennett, 'The Wounded Photographer: The Genesis of Jo Spence's Camera Therapy', *Afterimage*, vol.29, no.3, 2001, p.26.

3 J. Spence, *Cultural Sniping*, *op. cit.*, p.222.

conceptual diminishment. Beyond the camera, the visual cues that made up the working-class feminist Jo Spence are no longer there.

To look at a skeleton – a human-like form that has shed the imposed visual markers of race, gender and class – is to see the erasure of social inscription, to look on a post-identity democracy of the dead. To see a skeleton in the picture where Spence’s person would have been evokes the absence of the marks of identification that Spence once deployed to full effect. Identity and its representation were once Spence’s primary political grounds for action, following from Antonio Gramsci’s injunction as cited in her book *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression* (1995):

*The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces without leaving an inventory.*⁴

A skeleton by Spence, for what it isn’t, is something else. It is a potent identity’s end: how knowing oneself is finally, at least, to be thrown into the brutal category *mortal*. In the skeleton, history’s long exhausting product – identity – has fallen away.

Skeletons are photogenic. They are exposed exposures, compliant models, high contrast and delineated. They aren’t like corpses: they aren’t metabolic. And skeletons appear in the art historical record with a Platonic chauvinism of truth revealed: *all*, a skeleton says, *is vanity – but especially women*. If bone is not forever it is at least as solid as substances like stone and wood that seem less perishable than humans are, with our muscle, organs and skin. A skeleton looks almost teleological, or at least like a product, final and itself. A corpse, for which a skeleton often substitutes, is more accurate. A corpse is more a process than a thing, or at least a stage in a process. A corpse rotting multiply resists representation: it is disgusting, it is chronic and it is transformative. We smell it before we see it. A decaying corpse is something most don’t like to look at and can’t capture in a glance. Almost anything is easier to see than metabolism.

In Spence’s late work, decay is not neglected: it’s superimposed, if not exactly on her corpse, then on her corpus, with familiar images of her face and body now subject to the textures of a ‘return to nature’. The work she once made of herself now moves ‘herself’ into something else. The viscosity of photography gives way to tactility, or at least a visual evocation of the tactile, just as the fixedness (or fixed falseness) of representation gives way to the metabolic.

The decay or ‘return to nature’ photographs in Spence’s *Final Project* are not erasure, but instead a compounding and layering of Jo Spence, an identity, and photography, a medium, with a transformative metabolic process or at least its representation. In this late work, it’s almost like what Spence is doing is teaching herself a dialectical mode of dying.

Spence’s late work remains explicitly unfinished. It’s the work of crisis – not just a crisis in health, but also a crisis of politics. Spence’s *Final Project* occurred during a period in which she described the de-politicisation of an art practice that had for all of her life been explicitly political, a practice that she called ‘the lonely path I continued to walk until I collapsed with leukaemia’.⁵ Spence’s breast cancer work had sought to expose medicine’s ideological reproduction of class society; it instructed women in self-care, and traced the patriarchal burdening of women’s breasts – ‘the feelings generated that our body is merely a set of parts, and those parts are someone else’s property’.⁶ But for Spence, the work she had done around breast cancer did little to prepare her for her diagnosis with leukaemia.⁷ In an interview with Jan Zita Grover in 1991, Spence noted the change in her relationship to politics:

I’ve taken up tapestry and gardening because that’s the only way I know how to have any peace in my life. It seems to me that choosing to go like an Amazon into the lion’s den over and over again in order to be politically useful is just too energy-consuming and too conflictual. In the end it didn’t seem to me to serve any function at all, so it feels at this point as if I will never do anything again except look after myself. The task

4 *Ibid.*, p.96.

5 *Ibid.*, p.216.

6 *Ibid.*, p.125.

7 ‘Now that I have leukaemia, the language that worked with breast cancer doesn’t seem applicable.’ *Ibid.*, p.215.

*of looking after myself with leukaemia is like having a newborn baby to look after; the amount of things daily that I have to do to nurture myself... If there was a movement to belong to it would be a different matter, but I don't see one.*⁸

For Spence, whose work around breast cancer was relentlessly political,⁹ leukaemia brought a watershed of multiple exhaustions, both physical and emotional. 'When you're as badly damaged as I am,' wrote Jo Spence, 'you just want to have nice things around you. I don't really want to have to think about the *politics* of leukaemia.'¹⁰

In another photograph from Spence's *Final Project*, a make-up-smear mask is shrouded by a purple tablecloth from the 1970s feminist movement, upon which is written: 'You start by sinking into his arms, and end up with your arms in the kitchen sink.' What appear to be dried plants sprout from the eyes of the mask, and the tablecloth is draped in such a way that the text silkscreened on the tablecloth is difficult to read. This is an image of, among

Illness presents a problem for emancipatory politics, and likewise poses a challenge to political art.

other things, obscured sloganeering, a political material transformed into an aseptic, ritual one. The eyes of the dead are of no use for seeing, and in this there's not much use left for art that might open them. Under the conditions of death, the problems of hetero-romantic love and unwaged labour

might well just be aesthetic, that is, deinstrumentalised. One thing that mortality has going for it is that when you are dead you no longer have to do the dishes.

Dying from disease, or at least certain types of diseases,¹¹ is an experience that can appear fundamentally unavailable to the available politics. Serious illness can inhibit collectivity and impair mobility and the capacity to appear in public or do activist work. Johanna Hedva, in her recent essay 'Sick Woman Theory' (2016), frames the problem of illness and politics like this:

*As I lay there, unable to march, hold up a sign, shout a slogan that would be heard, or be visible in any traditional capacity as a political being, the central question of Sick Woman Theory formed: How do you throw a brick through the window of a bank if you can't get out of bed?*¹²

After her lumpectomy, Spence wrote a three-part series on breast cancer for the feminist magazine *Spare Rib*, which includes her description of the barriers to collectivity brought about by cancer:

*How do we deal with the abject loneliness of the long struggle for health (the most boring of subjects to other people who are 'well')? How to present yourself as a subject in daily struggle? ... Cancer may mean restructuring your life and society, but when you as an individual have it, the struggle is usually on your own! You have to get your priorities sorted out - if you are a feminist or a socialist it probably means that you are involved in half a dozen struggles which are no longer immediately relevant to your day-to-day life... This can cause a lot of internal conflict if not sorted out from the beginning. (I lay in bed worrying that I could not go to a rally at the Greenham peace camp the day before my operation!)*¹³

There are other barriers to politics inherent to the process of dying from illness: it is exhausting, painful, disabling and time-consuming; it can be repulsive to others, can smell bad or can look and sound repellant; and if the abject state of the sick person does not in itself keep others away, or turn all relations into ones of pity and dependency, the pain involved often creates an effect of

8 *Ibid.*, p.217.

9 Describing her breast cancer work, Spence later said: 'I think to some extent I abused myself: I was so anxious to be useful that I exploited myself in some ways.' *Ibid.*, p.212.

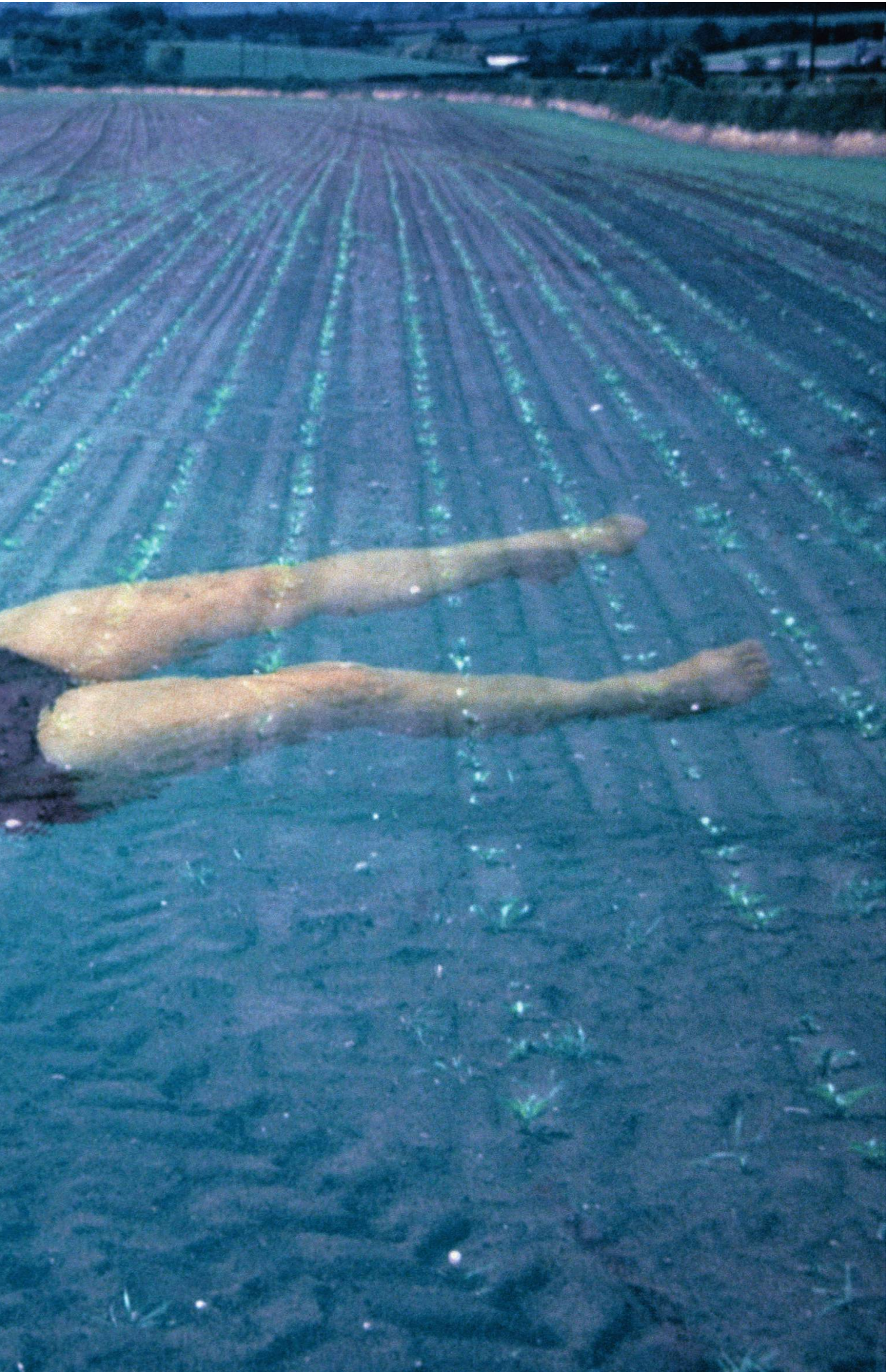
10 *Ibid.*, p.217. Emphasis in the original.

11 'The situation for dissident cancer patients is not the same as it is for people with AIDS. There is no groundswell of loving dissidents surrounding cancer patients.' *Ibid.*, p.214.

12 Johanna Hedva, 'Sick Woman Theory', *Mask Magazine* [online magazine], no.24, January 2016, available at <http://www.maskmagazine.com/not-again/struggle/sick-woman-theory> (last accessed on 27 July 2016).

13 J. Spence, *Cultural Sniping*, *op. cit.*, p.122.







Jo Spence, *A Picture of Health: Helmet*, 1982, photograph

Previous spread:
Jo Spence, *The Final Project*, 1991-92, photograph

heightened alienation all the same. To be reminded so frequently of one's death – as terminal patients often are – can undermine the motivations of a politics based in futurity. To even speak frankly of one's dying is often taboo: the dying are expected to pretend, for the sake of those around them, that they believe they are going to live. The ill, surrounded only (if they are lucky enough to have them) by their carers, are not often given opportunities to band together. And to be seriously ill, even without dying, is often to submit oneself to a set of insufficient and ideological optics: that of victim, or of 'warrior'; that of a compliant patient, or a rebellious one; that of a person who wants to live and through strength of character becomes a *survivor*, or, for women who are dying, that of a figure who, it is rumoured, really 'wants' to die.¹⁴

Illness presents a problem for emancipatory politics, and likewise poses a challenge to political art. If an artist's politics are expressed in an art based on corrective representations, like exposing the 'real' that lurks under the 'idealised', illness creates – at least – a double bind. Illness is, as Spence wrote, the 'ultimate crisis of self-representation',¹⁵ and part of that crisis is inherent in any attempt at making illness legible without reproducing the reductive heroics or violent sentimentalities attached to sickness. An image of a sick person – especially of one enduring the kind of illness, like cancer, that can render dramatic changes in appearance – can present upper-level pathos, but this is for a reason: to be a person who was once strong and vital and who now wastes away and dies is sad. How do you take a photo of a victim that doesn't look like a victim or like a victim's opposite? For Spence, it seems, the answer was *you don't*.

'My sex life', Jo Spence once wrote, 'was mostly conducted... in the cemetery.' The cemetery was, in the housing project she grew up in, the only place in which young people could find sufficient privacy for sexual exploration. Sex in the privacy only available in the graveyard is a kind of pleasure that is necessarily opportunistic of death. I think, too, in some ways, that the politics that Spence arrived at in her late work – a politics whose articulation as politics was lost to her – could borrow this as an analogy in the ways it was similarly opportunistic.

The impossibility of representation that leukaemia presented, the sense of bafflement Spence felt before it, the lack of available collective politics to act on it, the exhaustion that prevented her from articulating it, the violent transformation of her appearance that made her move away from previous methods of phototherapeutic self-documentation, in fact presented a new potential for a mode of understanding the political beyond the modes of self and self-representation that had determined her earlier work. Spence's oeuvre occupies a strange position in the cultural body of work made by the sick and dying. In one stage, it's confrontational, didactic and explicit, and in another, weary, private and ready to let the known politics go. In its final stage, her work found opportunity to explore identity in its negation. It secured a place, too, for absence and unknowing, and the metabolic. The systemic effects of leukaemia brought a politics of representation to its limits. It might be the case, though, that what Spence found was not an end point of politics, but a point at which identity – which had previously provided a seemingly solid grounds for politics – began to give way, and a new ground – this one with a broader horizon – was exposed.

14 The commentary in a recent piece on the death of Kathy Acker from breast cancer in 1997 illustrates this phenomenon of attributing to those who die of breast cancer a death wish: 'Tra Silverberg, who had, at various times, been Acker's publicist, agent and publisher, was certain she wanted to die. "It was her exit strategy", he says. "She was no longer as successful as she had been. Many friends had abandoned her. She wanted out."' Jason McBride, 'Last Days of Kathy Acker', *Hazlitt* [online journal], 28 July 2015, available at <http://hazlitt.net/feature/last-days-kathy-acker> (last accessed on 27 July 2016). 'Some people', writes Spence, 'have theorised that cancer is just another form of slow suicide.' J. Spence, *Cultural Sniping*, *op. cit.*, p.123.

15 *Ibid.*, p.146.







Arahmaiani, *Etalase (Display Case)*, 1994, installation with found objects

Previous spread: Arahmaiani, *Free Market Indonesia*, 2008. Both images courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York

The Premise of Contradiction and Feminist Politics: Reflections on Arahmaiani's Art and Life

– Angela Dimitrakaki

Arahmaiani's art and activism suggest that she may have lived a slightly different history of the world. Or, to be more precise, born in Bandung, Indonesia in 1961, she seems to have lived a prefigured history of the world as known in 2016. This, of course, has to do with the vantage point from which the history of the world is normatively written and, by implication, presumed to be lived and 'known'. It is a vantage point affirming the hegemony, in the Gramscian sense of the word, of a 'Western experience', and the principal issue addressed in this

mentalists, causing Arahmaiani to flee Indonesia to Australia and, later, Thailand.² Like so many other contemporary subjects, Arahmaiani has come to live a life of departures and arrivals, partly because of the fear of persecution, partly because of forms of activism that environmental challenges in Asia have demanded,³ partly because of the ways production is organised in the art field today. This pattern of life is recognisable as 'contemporary' in its requirement of mobility. And yet 'mobility' is wholly inadequate in bringing forth the diversity of forced movement that delivers the global terrain as the realisation of a complex biopolitical rule – of which more later, after a few more words on hegemony.

Angela Dimitrakaki describes how Arahmaiani's life and work expose the alliance of capitalism, religion and the state in the subjugation of women.

short essay concerns the conflicts and contradictions this hegemony generates for feminist politics in the global art field.

Coming across a vitrine juxtaposing a box of condoms, a Buddha icon and the Qur'an, one might be tempted to date the artwork to sometime after 9/11, when the history of the world began to be scripted openly along the lines of a 'clash of civilisations'.¹ And one would be wrong. Arahmaiani made *Etalase (Display Case)* in 1994. In terms of what neoliberal higher education now calls non-academic impact, *Etalase* would score rather high. It resulted in death threats issued by Islamic funda-

Feminism, Criticism, Expectations

When *Etalase* was exhibited as part of 'Global Feminisms', at the Brooklyn Museum in New York in 2007,⁴ *The New York Times* reviewer Roberta Smith mentioned Arahmaiani among the artists that the curators had drawn from 'the international biennial circuit'. Associated with 'the institutional stage', this circuit was one of two connected 'success platforms' from which the curators, we were told, had selected the participating artists – the other being 'the market'.⁵ Smith's observations concerning the contexts where women artists meet 'success' should already be sufficient to raise, yet again, the issue of a feminist canon: is it an inevitable outcome of

- 1 The controversial phrase 'clash of civilisations' was coined by Samuel P. Huntington in 1993 ('The Clash of Civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3, Summer 1993, pp. 22–49), and was frequently echoed in talk of George W. Bush's 'War on Terror' after 9/11.
- 2 Objections were raised both against *Etalase* as blasphemous art and against the painting *Lingga-Yoni* (both 1994), which pictured a Hindu symbol combining male and female genitals against a background reading 'nature is a book' scripted in Jawi. See 'A Conversation with Arahmaiani' (with Susan Syllas and Chrysanne Stathacos), *Mommy* [blog], 20 April 2014, available at <http://www.mommybyssilasandstathacos.com/2014/04/20/a-conversation-with-arahmeiani/> (last accessed on 5 June 2016).
- 3 In 2010, Arahmaiani began a collaboration with Tibetan monks on the commons of water, a long-term project near Yushu in Tibet. See Arahmaiani Feisal, 'My Second Life in Tibet', *Art Asia Pacific*, issue 79, July–August 2012, available at http://trfineart.com/pdfs/reviews/0000/0505/AAP79_SecondLifeInTibet_Arahmaiani.pdf (last accessed on 5 June 2016).
- 4 'Global Feminisms', Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum, New York, 23 March–1 July 2007, curated by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin. The exhibition included 87 women artists from around the world and aimed 'to move beyond the specifically Western brand of feminism that has been perceived as the dominant voice of feminist and artistic practice'. See https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/global_feminisms/ (last accessed on 5 June 2016).
- 5 Roberta Smith, 'They Are Artists Who Are Women; Hear Them Roar', *The New York Times*, 23 March 2007, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/23/arts/design/23glob.html?_r=0 (last accessed on 5 June 2016).

what a feminist exhibition or art museum does?⁶ The issue of the canon is historically specific, being inevitably implicated in an art world operating on the principle of competition as the quintessential value of capital as social relation, or what Arahmaiani defined, back in 1993, as the transformation of ‘human life into a hopeless rat race, each rat struggling to reach the top of the social pyramid (the pinnacle of which is “pure materialism”)’.⁷

The contradiction between artistic (and most likely also curatorial) intentions and the selection process identified by the reviewer is far from new. It has been the permanent headache for feminism in the art world, at least since the second wave demanded visibility for women artists in the art world’s actually existing institutions. But Smith, in *The New York Times*, went on to say something more: ‘Most of the work here [in ‘Global Feminisms’] is essentialist, body-oriented and familiar to the point of old-fashioned. Again and again and again women fall back on making art from the thing nearest at hand that separates them from men: their bodies – and often echo their predecessors rather literally.’⁸ Given that ‘Global Feminisms’ only included artists born after 1960, the above remark presumes a global history of feminist art, articulated generationally, to be not merely a curatorial argument (and as such, possibly contested) but a fact: a transnationally manifested reality of distinct national-cultural spaces living through the same historical evolution of ‘feminist art’, so that when this art enters a shared exhibition space its progress can be evaluated as satisfactory or not according to a unique, appropriate and universal yardstick. This art was expected to advance on the basis of a progression of recognisable themes: works that are ‘body-oriented’ were deemed ‘old-fashioned’ by 2007 – that is, they were outmoded already nine years ago.

Insofar as ‘Global Feminisms’ was not just an exhibition of works/projects but a showcase for feminist artists’ commitments and long-term visions, Smith’s remarks epitomise the problem of criteria in the reception of feminist artists’ *lives* rather than just work. This has important implications for feminist methodologies, both in

academia and curatorial practice, for it shows that overcoming biography as celebration of individual difference has not necessarily led to an updating of materialist feminist approaches in art history. While materialist feminism remains the only methodological approach to art history that enables us to attend to the connection between actually lived lives and the structures, processes and conflicts that dictate life choices and patterns, it urgently needs to address the loss of distinction between work and life identified with post-Fordism as the broader context of artistic production. Besides this, the critic’s demand for thematic evolution is symptomatic of feminism’s entrapment in the project mentality: not only individual artists but also generations of feminists should invent ‘new’ projects, that is, projects of sufficient innovation. Adopting such a project-based mentality is not without contradictions when it comes to feminism. Feminist artists’ lives are expected to unfold as a serial pursuit of reinvention while also sustaining a permanent political state of being. What is asked from artists such as Arahmaiani is to be unique as well as embedded in the allegedly collective advance of feminism as a global history. But global history, so far, is not one of collective advances. In fact, it is proving to be one of locally managed legacies of imperialism. Which may well be why the body, on which imperial violence is inflicted, refuses to evacuate the (art) historical scene.

The Forces that ‘Move’ the Body

If *Etalase* makes an oblique reference to the body, other works by Arahmaiani – especially her performances – deploy the body in immediate terms. And as Arahmaiani has herself explained, her interest has been in the body rather than in the category of performance art (a term she was introduced to by curators visiting Indonesia from Australia and Japan in the early 1990s).⁹ Already in 1993, she said: ‘What has become the focus of my attention are the situations, the forces that “move” the body.’¹⁰ This statement becomes more concrete if one considers Arahmaiani’s work overall; her focus on specific historical

6 On the canon, feminism and capitalism in a global context, see Angela Dimitrakaki, Lara Perry et al., ‘Constant Redistribution: A Roundtable on Feminism, Art and the Curatorial Field’, *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, June 2012, pp. 218–41.

7 Arahmaiani, ‘The Basis of My Thought Is a Concern with Balance, or the Conjunction of Opposites’ (1993), unpublished manuscript.

8 R. Smith, ‘They Are Artists Who Are Women; Hear Them Roar’, *op. cit.*

9 See ‘A Conversation with Arahmaiani’, *op. cit.*

10 Arahmaiani, ‘The Basis of My Thought Is a Concern with Balance, or the Conjunction of Opposites’, *op. cit.*



Arahmaiani, *Petaka (The Disaster)*, 2015. Installation view, Jakarta Biennale, 2015. Courtesy the artist and Jakarta Biennale

events, on the passage of history as such, is unmissable. This history is often highlighted as one of ‘disaster’ – disaster that refuses to go away and in relation to which (rather than in the aftermath of which) Arahmaiani creates.

In *Petaka (The Disaster)*, 2015, the piles of ‘used’ clothes interspersed in the exhibition space, as if discarded following the death of their owners, referred not just to the hundreds of thousands tortured and killed in 1965–66 during the infamous anti-communist purge led by General Suharto, but to the ways in which a past atrocity extends itself into the present: the history textbooks where the leftist intellectuals and farmers who opposed the Suharto regime are presented as murderers rather than victims; the precari-

ous position of the Chinese minority in Indonesia, and the constantly exploited legacy of colonial rule; the regime’s former cadres’ continued spoliation of the country, now as directors of companies engaged in environmental destruction. Arahmaiani’s response, in 2013, to the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the Netherlands was: ‘No, that is not true. It’s still ongoing.’¹¹ In a recent national-press article written in response to a specific incident in Yogyakarta, where she currently lives, Arahmaiani criticised the violence of Islamic fundamentalists towards the LGBT community and highlighted the centuries-old tradition of Indonesian dance wherein men publicly perform in drag.¹² One might say, then, that if the body continues to

11 ‘A Conversation with Arahmaiani’, *op. cit.* Arahmaiani stresses that most of the Indonesian migrant workers working in contemporary slavery conditions are women.



Arahmaiani, *Tangan Ada Lagi Kekerasan II* (*No More Violence II*), 2015. Performance view, Jakarta Biennale, 2015. Courtesy the artist and Jakarta Biennale

be present in her work, as much as in anyone's, this may well be because the body is not a 'theme' to be potentially dropped (in favour of less explored themes), but the target, register and effect of power. There is, indeed, nothing new in this, although power as such has a history.

Michel Foucault used the term 'bio-power'¹³ in connection with the techniques of power adopted by the modern nation state, but what constitutes the 'modernity' of the contemporary, twenty-first-century state is becoming increasingly complex – not least because of the state's role in what we have come to know as 'globalisation'. Far from disappearing, the state now plays an indispensable role in dividing a globally connected workforce and the equally global surplus labour reserves into management-friendly units. In 2007, the year of 'Global Feminisms', Malcolm Bull wrote in his introduction to the Spring issue of *New Left Review*: 'A selection of the most pressing political questions of the moment might include the following: Should women wear headscarves? May we buy and sell our bodily organs? How can we control the weather?'

The paradox of art as non-deferred but actually existing critique is that art's power is recognised as 'real' first and foremost by those who hold real power.

Whereas such issues had been associated with the uneven terrain of globalisation as geo-political process, 'now, many [such issues] are considered biopolitical in the sense that they are produced through interactions of political power with the private and the corporeal. Almost imperceptibly, globalisation has become biopolitics.'¹⁴ Women, as expected, have a special role to play in this process, since their crossing from the (presumed private) space of *oikos* to the (presumed public) space of the *polis* can still be described as a struggle.¹⁵

Increasingly, it is becoming understood that this crossing may not be to emancipation but to a different domain and structure of subjugation. To say that 'globalisation collapses the distinction of public and private' hardly means that this collapse takes effect in favour of women.¹⁶ If anything, we are hereby forced to recognise that a key demand of feminism (this very collapse) is realised to the opposite effect when not executed in the context of a feminist politics: the collapse of private and public under the aegis of global capital has not meant the liberation of women but a general feminisation of subjects, a constant pull of so-called singularities towards the loss of the rights of the polis as the rights of the fully human. Feminism must now speak about feminised bodies in this sense. But in this globalised sphere the state is not the sole engine of disempowerment and regulator of subjugation.

Articulations of Biopower

Arahmaiani's prefigured, rather than deferred or belated, history of the world is important in many ways, but perhaps principally because it breaks with the tradition that sees radical art as always somehow being trapped in an 'afterwards', speaking its truth (and this can only be a social truth) from a future position.¹⁷ It is this future position that will cause the oppositionality or criticality of art to be concretely experienced. *Etalase* is an example of a work that spoke a social truth in the 'here and now' of its making, and brought forth a biopolitical reception as a result. It was not the first time that the Indonesian artist experienced the impact of her art on her life. Since the early 1980s, Arahmaiani's work has consistently challenged the oppression of women by religion. I will refrain from saying that her art has consistently challenged the oppression of women 'by Islam' or 'by certain versions of Islam'. I do so not out of political correctness but rather because religion, historically and today, is the general framework sustaining patriarchal rule as

12 See Arahmaiani, 'Menolak Tragedi Kekerasan', *Kompas*, 12 March 2016, p.26. With thanks to Suzan Piper for providing an English translation.

13 See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: The Will to Knowledge* (1976, trans. Robert Hurley), London: Penguin, 1998.

14 Malcolm Bull, 'Globalization and Biopolitics: Introduction to New Left Review 45', *New Left Review*, no.45, May-June 2007, pp.1-2. Emphasis added.

15 The dominant meaning of private and public is problematised by strands of leftist feminist thought. See Endnotes, 'The Logic of Gender', *Endnotes*, issue 3, September 2013, available at <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/3/en/endnotes-the-logic-of-gender> (last accessed on 5 June 2016).

16 M. Bull, 'Globalization and Biopolitics: Introduction to New Left Review 45', *op. cit.*, pp.1-2.

17 On the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde, see Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996.

women's material and ideological reality of subjugation – even if in different eras and contexts one religion may appear more patriarchal than others. This typically has to do with the *degree* to which this or that religion manages to impose its rule in a given social context. What is called 'fundamentalism' can therefore appear, at least to those who represent it, as the logical extension of this primary imposition as a social consensus.

Arahmaiani would almost certainly disagree with the above position, as she does not reject religion altogether but rather defends the right to be critical of one's religion in its relation to realised social power. And as one might expect, Arahmaiani's critique is not exhausted with Islam, which is very important for negotiating *how* the critique of Islam is scripted into her art. She is also critical of capitalism, especially of its propensity to appropriate the wealth of life into the ring of consumerism. *Etalase* is also an ironic exposition of commodity fetishism, including the commodity fetishism that applies to the artwork as an assortment of 'things' brought together by the artist's singular vision and encased as 'the work'. The proximity of the condom, Qur'an, Coca-Cola bottle and other objects in the glass case is what has been perceived as offensive to a great extent – a double offence, for not only is a sacred text equated with mass-produced objects signifying 'pleasure' (condoms and Coca-Cola) but all are contained and overwritten by the authority of the artwork. However, the scenario becomes plausible only if one has the power to attribute to art the power to cause offence. The paradox of art as non-deferred but actually existing critique is this: art's power to undermine is recognised as 'real' first and foremost by those who hold real power – by which I mean power that can be evidenced in its material consequences rather than held symbolically as the promise of power.

Arahmaiani's work, its reception and the impact of this reception on the life of a 'woman artist' (if we are to retain this important historical and political category introduced decades ago by feminist art history), invites reflection on the range of

agents commanding power over life, or what is called 'biopower'. The concept of biopower has generated such widespread interest in conjunction with the biopolitical reality of capitalist globalisation and neoliberalism as to hide from view what the etymology of the term suggests. Whereas there is no doubt that capital institutes forms of governance that are biopolitical, organised religion's participation in 'techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations' is hard to refute.¹⁸ The reflections that Arahmaiani's work and, crucially, life itself invite cannot but address that gender, sex and reproductive politics remain the fundamental parameters in the critique of biopower, and that on many occasions the symbiosis of religion and the state is symptomatic of the culture of alliance required for the articulation of biopower. Such an alliance grows stronger if capital joins it. Globalisation presents numerous examples where the triangle of capital-state-religion is becoming normalised. In Europe this is evident in nation states where post-socialist regimes have been adopting a model of transition that comfortably combines capitalism, the state and religion in dictating specifically the management of women's bodies (in relation to abortion, foremost).¹⁹ In these cases, the religion is Christianity, which I will take as corroborating the argument that we must look at religion at large as a mechanism of combining control and discipline as well as the management of behaviour, rather than at this or that expression of theocratic rule.

The issue of religion and feminism can no longer be sidelined. Inevitably, the discussion has to encompass the troubling question of whether the idea of politics as such (including feminist politics) is compatible not just with the framework of any organised religion but with belief in a power that is placed over and above the world of human affairs, including society, history and biology. The contradiction at the heart of modern politics, that social relations are mediated both by an immanent and an extraneous power, is symptomatic of modernity's failed project of secularism; but this should not be seen as an accident. In this light, a feminist critique of religion

18 M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, op. cit., p.140.

19 Indicatively, see Agence France-Presse in Warsaw, 'Protesters call for near-total ban on abortions in Poland', *The Guardian*, 15 May 2016, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/15/abortions-poland-demonstrators-call-near-total-ban> (last accessed on 5 June 2016); and Gillian Pascall and Anna Kwak, *Gender Regimes in Transition in Central and Eastern Europe*, Bristol: Polity Press, 2005.



Arahmaiani, *Nation for Sale*, 1996, installation and performance. Performance view, 2nd Asia-Pacific Triennial, Brisbane, Australia, 1996. Courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York

that does not disregard religion – such as that practiced by Arahmaiani – is not a non sequitur but rather a form of critical pragmatism as the ground for politics. And this includes feminist politics. It is a critique that confronts the actuality of power not only in the ‘external’ environment but also in the processes and sedimentations of internalisation – in what used to be called ‘ideology’.

A Return to Ideology?

Ideology, in its Marxist apprehension as the set of naturalised ideas covering the reality of social relations that must be reproduced to the benefit of the ruling class, was once a core term of feminist art history, at least as thought and written in Europe and North America in the 1970s and 80s. Progressively, and as the tensions of societies made to operate for global capital became apparent, from the 1990s onwards – and at an accelerated pace since the ‘crisis’ of 2008 – ideology has fallen into gradual disuse. Who needs to understand the formation of subjectivity through the naturalisation of values and ensuing interpellations (to remember Louis Althusser) when both subjects and values end up reproducing a

planetary social reality strewn by devastating hyperproduction (and therefore consumption) and unbridled dispossession? The systemic ills arising from global capitalism are plain for all to see, and as regards the position of most women, suffice to download data from the World Bank and International Labour Organization (ILO) websites.²⁰ Importantly, the ‘position of most women’ is generated by the culture of alliance among current forms and institutions of biopolitical governance. This alliance may be expressed according to whatever variety of forms, ‘local’ parameters or customs, but women continue to carry the burden of gendered oppression. In her 1997 performance *Handle without Care*, a video record of which is held at the re.act.feminism performance archive, the commentary on the alliance was obvious. It is worth giving the archive’s description of the work:

The performance takes place on top of a hill just before sunset. The artist, clad in an elaborate ceremonial outfit, performs Balinese dance movements around a white circle painted on the ground with a large bottle of Coca-Cola

20 The ILO has reported that in 2016: ‘Inequality between women and men persists in global labour markets, in respect of opportunities, treatment and outcomes. Over the last two decades, women’s significant progress in educational achievements has not translated into a comparable improvement in their position at work. In many regions in the world, in comparison to men, women are more likely to become and remain unemployed, have fewer chances to participate in the labour force and [...] have to accept lower quality jobs’, and ‘between 1995 and 2015, the global female labour force participation rate decreased from 52.4 to 49.6 per cent’. The same report stresses that women do most of the ‘unpaid care and household work’. International Labour Organization, *Women at Work, Trends 2016: Executive Summary*, Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2016, p.3.



standing upright in the middle. The artist, wearing black sunglasses, holds two plastic toy guns in her hands, incorporating them as ritual elements of the dance. During the performance she shakes the Coke bottle and eventually opens it with an explosion of pent-up carbonation that spills into the smaller circle. Mantras can be heard on a CD player, whose singing mixes with the electronic sounds of the guns, producing a cacophony of sound. Through a game of extremes between sacred and profane, between the religious objects and the cheap ones of mass consumption, Arahmaiani introduces dissonant

elements in her interpretation of society and questions its ritualisation, reflecting on its tensions and contradictions.²¹

As a totalising enterprise, globalisation (a term whose glorious ascent to ubiquity began around the time of this performance) is the expert field where dissonant elements come into confluence to bring forth a specific, if formidable in scale, organisation and management of, well, dissonance. Globalisation overcomes what postmodernism delivered as 'surrealism without the unconscious', in the unforgettable expression of Fredric Jameson.²² Rather, each fragment finds its place, arranged by the

21 Arahmaiani, 'Handle without Care' (1997), *re.act feminism #2* [website], available at <http://www.reactfeminism.org/entry.php?l=lb&id=231&e=&v=&a=&t=> (last accessed on 5 May 2016). Emphasis added.

22 See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 1991, pp.67–97.

Arahmaiani, *Handle without Care*, 1996. Performance view, 2nd Asia-Pacific Triennial, Brisbane, Australia, 1996. Photograph: Manit Sriwanichpoom. Courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York

alliance of biopower to fairly specific effects – the overarching of them dubbed a more or less operative ‘empire’ despite capital’s crises.²³ The ‘cheap’ objects of ‘mass consumption’ used by Arahmaiani in her performance are also objects of mass production and cheap labour. The ‘game of extremes between sacred and profane’ is a prophesy of the nineteenth century, worded back then as ‘all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned’.²⁴ It is *The Communist Manifesto*’s remarkably accurate prediction about turbulence in the twenty-first century. But curiously, globalisation as the ground where holy things become profaned is also where human beings are held increasingly hostage to the biopolitics of holiness. The return to a certain kind of surrealism is undeniable, except that now the designation applies to the *autonomisation* of the economy from politics as a real-life vanguard generated out of capital’s dynamism, on the one hand, and to increasingly persuasive articulation of capitalism’s materialism with religion’s promise of post-life exodus through immateriality, on the other. Arahmaiani’s art addresses the failure of any such synthesis.

In Conclusion, Nothing Is Left Behind

What can feminism learn from Arahmaiani’s art and life story? And more importantly, perhaps, how can feminism avoid marginalising it as a challenging anomaly to canonised expectations about how feminist art history ought to be proceeding? What is to be done with an embodied paradigm that is ‘different’ to the one already normalised in, and through, feminism – a political discourse and praxis that, in addition to other ruptures, has succeeded in creating its own periodisation of art’s history? I am purposefully using the singular ‘history’ to refer to an evolving narrative about contemporary art. Yet this is not to propose a false unity of simultaneous feminist activity in relation to it, but rather to indicate a political reluctance to concede to a compartmentalised articulation of the rebelliousness of feminist consciousness. High globalisation and its biopolitical matrix of power disallow the fiction of such compartmentalisation. Effectively, globalisation as biopolitics compels us to do away with the idea not of the new but of the old.

There is no old subject matter. There is nothing old in a mode of production that has a place for everything and everyone. There’s just constant synchronisation and its setbacks, which social struggles must strive to make the most of. Hence the importance of Arahmaiani’s prefigured history of the world. Her long-term politics appears to be located in exposing the contradictions this intricate administrative regime is most eager to accommodate. And feminism in the art field can, and must, register, politically, what this accommodation holds for the subjects that get caught in the impossibility of completing this process.

23 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

24 Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848, trans. Samuel Moore), available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf> (last accessed on 5 June 2016).



Arahmaiani,
Offerings from A to Z,
1996. Performance
view, Padaeng
Crematorium,
Chiang Mai,
Thailand. Courtesy
the artist and
Indonesian Visual
Art Archive (IVAA),
Yogyakarta

Arahmaiani: Challenging the Status Quo

– Wulan Dirgantoro

In her contribution to the catalogue of the exhibition 'Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art' (2007) at the Brooklyn Museum in New York, art historian Joan Kee critiques how the complexity of Asian women artists' work is flattened out within an international context. She notes how international art critics and curators have

of religion. Yet a closer analysis of the artist's body of work shows that Arahmaiani's challenge to the status quo is inextricable from the complex web of ethical, social and political meanings that the female body carries in the Indonesian context.

Arahmaiani grew up in a predominantly Muslim, middle-class family in Bandung, West Java. She went to the Faculty of Fine Arts, Bandung Institute of Technology to study painting, and turned to performance art after joining an experimental body art group called Sumber Waras (loosely translated as 'Fountain of Wellbeing'). The group's approach to the interplay of body art, theatre and sociopolitical critique often took them to the streets of Bandung, where they could escape their art school's stifling conservatism. It was outside of school, in the library of Indonesia's foremost feminist scholar, Toeti Heraty, that Arahmaiani was introduced to discussions of gender and sexuality. In February 1981, she spent two days and nights with a group of fellow students in the streets of Bandung wrapping lamp posts with blood-red lengths of cloth, tracing silhouettes on the tarmac and distributing flyers with the death statistics of illegal racing on the main thoroughfare of Bandung.³ The happening, titled *Kecelakaan* (*Accident*), caused much controversy in the art school. Two years later, she ruffled feathers again when she and two male friends made chalk drawings on the street of tanks, weapons and other military equipment on the day marking Indonesia's independence from the Netherlands, in clear allusion to the military rule of Suharto's New Order regime (1966–98). Arahmaiani was arrested immediately after the performance and released one month later, after signing a form stating that she was mentally disturbed – a ruse organised by

Wulan Dirgantoro situates Arahmaiani's work in the context of current feminist struggles in Indonesia.

tended to focus on artworks that are illustrative either of an art movement that can be assimilated into Western art historical models or of a specific sociopolitical context, thereby reducing the art of the region to a handful of themes. Kee discusses Arahmaiani's performance *Offerings from A to Z* (1996) as representative of one such trope: 'the artwork as a challenge to the systems that attempt to order women according to imposed agendas'.¹ In this performance, realised in Thailand at the Padaeng Crematorium as part of Chiang Mai Social Installation (CMSI), the artist first laid herself down amongst weaponry and other items, then on a stone table used for washing corpses, surrounded by black-and-white images of scantily dressed heterosexual couples in erotic poses. 'Standing at ground level and looking down at her body,' Kee writes, 'the viewer unwittingly becomes complicit in the death of the artist. The subsequent documentary photograph ... only confirms the centrality of sacrifice. It neither offers nor corroborates other interpretative possibilities.'² Kee appears to criticise Arahmaiani's work for merely conforming to stereotype, in this case the sacrifice of women in the name

1 See Joan Kee, 'What is Feminist About Contemporary Asian Women's Art?', in Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin (ed.), *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art* (exh. cat.), London and New York: Merrell Publishers and Brooklyn Museum, 2007, p.111.

2 *Ibid.*

3 For more on this work, see F.X. Harsono, 'Kerakyatan dalam Seni Lukis Indonesia: Sejak PERSAGI hingga Kini', in Wicaksono Adi, Sumartono et al. (ed.), *Aspek-aspek Seni Visual Indonesia: Politik dan Gender*, Yogyakarta: Yayasan Seni Cemeti, 2001, p.76; and Carla Bianpoen, Wulan Dirgantoro and Farah Wardani, *Indonesian Women Artists: The Curtain Opens*, Jakarta: Yayasan Seni Rupa Indonesia, 2007, p.43.



a friend. Fearing for her safety, Arahmaiani left the country, first for Australia and later for the Netherlands, where she pursued her art education.⁴

A decade later, it was not the military but Islamist hardliners who took offence at two works shown as part of Arahmaiani's solo exhibition 'Sex, Religion and Coca Cola' (1994) at Oncor Studio in Jakarta. The painting *Lingga-Yoni* (1994) depicts the Hindu symbols *yonis* and *lingam*, reminiscent of female and masculine organs respectively, against a scripted background in Arabic and *jawi* – an Arabic script used for writing in Malay and other Southeast Asian languages, which was originally used to relay religious content during the spread of Islam. The first line of the script reads 'nature is a book', and the artist has stated that the painting reflects on how nature can be understood and read through symbols – like a book.⁵ But the spiritual dimension of the work fell on deaf ears at the time, with Islamist hardliners denouncing the depiction of the genitals as obscene.

Etalase (*Display Case*, 1994) was even more controversial. Here the artist placed several objects together within a display case, ranging from religious items such as a Buddha statue and the Qur'an to everyday consumables such as a Coca-Cola bottle and a pack of condoms. The work was intended to criticise the commercialisation of religion in Indonesia, but it was the association of sex and Islam that offended. After receiving death threats, the artist fled Indonesia again to Australia, where she continued her studies, after which she led an internationally nomadic life for nearly a decade.

Arahmaiani has become known as a feminist artist, both in Indonesia and overseas, owing to her willingness to tackle thorny issues such as religion, violence, the state and patriarchy.⁶ While in the international art system this may be an appealing label, as per Kee's suggestion, in Indonesia, where feminists are painted almost comically as militant, angry women, such an epithet can seriously hinder an artist's career. Even if the current market interest in Indonesian

Arahmaiani, *Kecelakaan I* (*Accident I*), 1981, performance. Courtesy the artist and Indonesian Visual Art Archive (IVAA), Yogyakarta

4 Arahmaiani attended the Paddington Art School, Australia (1983–85) and Akademie voor Beeldende Kunst en Vormgeving, Enschede, the Netherlands (1991–92).

5 See 'A Conversation with Arahmaiani' (with Susan Silas and Chrysanne Stachatos), in *Mommy* [blog], <http://www.mommybysilasandstachatos.com/2014/04/20/a-conversation-with-arahmeiani/> (last accessed on 24 July 2016).

6 Arahmaiani has noted that it was probably Michael O'Ferrall, the late curator of Asian and Aboriginal Art at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth who first labelled her a feminist artist, quite possibly in 1995 during her time at Claremont School of Art, Perth. Unpublished manuscript in the artist's personal archive. See also A. Poshyananda, 'Roaring Tigers, Desperate Dragons in Transition', in A. Poshyananda (ed.), *Contemporary Art in Asia: Tradition/Tension*, New York: Asia Society, p. 46.

contemporary art has brought to the fore a growing number of female collectors, curators, gallery owners and managers, this trend does not necessarily close the dramatic gender imbalance affecting most art institutions in Indonesia, from museums and galleries through to academia and the press – most Indonesian women artists still rely on male-dominated patronage networks in order to advance their careers.⁷

Feminism in Indonesia has long been associated with ‘unnatural’ political activism, which dates back to the New Order’s demonisation of the women’s organisation Gerwani (short for Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, or Indonesian Women’s Movement).⁸ The New Order of General Suharto took over President Sukarno’s government following a failed coup on 30 September 1965, when six high-ranking army officers were kidnapped and executed. Though the coup had been orchestrated from within the military, General Suharto accused the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and affiliated organisations such as Gerwani of being behind the attempt;⁹ a brutal anti-communist purge followed, which would claim the life of half million people in Indonesia, and paved the way for General Suharto’s overthrow of Sukarno in 1966.¹⁰ The mass killings of PKI and Gerwani members (real or imagined) were legitimised by accusations of sexual debauchery, allegedly committed by Gerwani members during the murders of military officers. Though the New Order’s vilification of Gerwani was part of a campaign to whip up anti-communist sentiment, its impact still reverberates.¹¹ Indonesian women artists struggle today with the stigmatisation of progressive, politically active women, and also the condemnation of the female body more generally.¹²

Following the fall of Suharto in May 1998, Arahmaiani began a series of works involving the female body. First performed in the French Cultural Centre in Bandung in 1999, the performance *Dayang Sumbi Menolak Status Quo* (*Dayang Sumbi Rejects the Status Quo*) exposes the artist’s body to physical intervention by inviting the audience to write on her body. Video documentation shows the artist onstage wearing a traditional red-lace blouse (*kebaya*) and humming to the tune of an Islamic devotional song (*shalawat*) while playing a handheld traditional drum (*rebana*). She tells the audience that she is always required to appear beautiful and proceeds to apply a light make-up whilst describing her action to the audience, though she immediately shows her dissatisfaction. Then she draws a thin moustache with eyeliner, drinks from a bottle of Coca-Cola and provocatively asks the audience to tell her what to do next. She later appears wearing only a dark corset, standing with both arms outstretched, while a male member of the audience writes on her chest. Other members of the audience come forward to write on different parts of her body as she encourages them to write their thoughts freely; some participants put the *kebaya* back on the artist, others take it off again. By the performance’s end, the *kebaya* has been torn apart and the artist’s hair is dishevelled.

By allowing male participants to touch her body – and most of the participants in the 1999 performance were male – the artist intentionally transgresses the sociocultural norms of Indonesia’s Muslim-majority society. In a stricter interpretation of Islam, women and men are forbidden to touch each other if they are not related by blood or marriage; thus the content of this work

7 Patronage has often been perceived as one of the quickest ways for young artists in Indonesia to advance their careers. For example, Toeti Heraty established Cemara 6 Gallery and Café in Jakarta in 1993 to focus on Indonesian women artists in particular. Since 2003 the gallery has broadened its exhibition programme.

8 Gerwani was the biggest Indonesian women’s movement in 1950–65, and its main aim was to reach equality with men. The organisation did this initially by combating illiteracy and supporting education for women, setting up childcare facilities and kindergartens and advocating for marriage reform, before shifting its focus to equal labour rights for women and equal responsibilities in the struggle for ‘full national independence’ and socialism. See Saskia Wieringa, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia*, New York and The Hague: Palgrave/Macmillan and Institute of Social Studies, 2002, p.140.

9 At the height of its activities in 1963, Gerwani claimed to have three million members, many closely affiliated with the PKI.

10 See Katherine McGregor and Vanessa Hearman, ‘Challenges of Political Rehabilitation in Post-New Order Indonesia: the case of Gerwani (Indonesian Women’s Movement)’, *South East Asia Research*, vol.15, issue 3, pp.365–66.

11 Saskia Wieringa has argued that the main sticking point was Gerwani’s campaign for women to become politically active, though some Gerwani members’ opposition to polygamy may have also antagonised sections of the Muslim community. See S. Wieringa, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia*, *op. cit.*, p.7.

12 Melani Budianta has shown that women’s movements during the post-1998 Reformasi period attempted to break free from the stereotype of the militant feminist by engaging with women from diverse classes, religions and ethnic backgrounds. See M. Budianta, ‘The Blessed Tragedy: The making of women’s activism during the Reformasi years’, in A. Heryanto and S.K. Mandal (ed.), *Challenging Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia: Comparing Indonesia and Malaysia*, New York: Routledge, 2012, pp.145–77.



Arahmaiani, *Lingga-Yoni*, 1994, acrylic on canvas, 182 × 140cm. Courtesy the artist and Indonesian Visual Art Archive (IVAA), Yogyakarta

Overleaf:
Arahmaiani, *Offerings from A to Z*, 1996. Performance view, Padaeng Crematorium, Chiang Mai. Courtesy the artist and Indonesian Visual Art Archive (IVAA), Yogyakarta

straddles the (in)visible markers of the political and the personal. Arahmaiani has stated that in exhibiting her body and letting others touch her, she is crossing boundaries that are not only personal but also material, namely, the fragility of (women's) bodies under the threat of invasion and violence.¹³ Arahmaiani actively encourages the audience to participate in the performance, thus sanctioning transgression on her body and choosing to stand as a speaking subject

Arahmaiani's work reflects upon the imbalanced relationship between the individual and the state in Indonesia, where vulnerable bodies are both pawn and victim in a struggle for power.

rather than conforming to the passive-female stereotype. The title references Dayang Sumbi, a Sundanese mythological figure of pre-Islamic origin whose story bears similarity with that of Oedipus.¹⁴ Following a series of events and misfortunes, Dayang Sumbi is about to marry her long-lost son, Sangkuriang. Upon realising this, she gives her son a series of impossible tasks; when he is about to complete them, she asks the gods to turn her into a flower. In stating 'Dayang Sumbi Rejects the Status Quo', Arahmaiani challenges the embodiment of the feminine as an erotic and fatal object.

In *His-story* (2000–01), first performed in 2000 at the Jakarta International Performance Art Festival, the role of the artist's body further shifts from a receptacle of thoughts into a kind of cathartic medium. The performance starts with Arahmaiani sitting in front of a small table. She faces the audience and slowly covers her face with a piece of tissue, which she then blows at repeatedly until a hole opens in it. She later pulls the petals off a red rose, takes her shirt off and pens the words 'exploitation' on her inner right arm and 'abuse of power' across her chest. She goes on to light a cigarette and

smoke it, contemplating the cigarette in her fingers. Slowly the artist stands up, takes a handgun from the table and aims it at her right temple. She stands in this position for a few minutes before slowly closing her eyes, placing the gun on the table and exiting the stage. Performing the piece at Art Space Osaka in 2001, Arahmaiani wrote the word 'inferno' on a piece of tissue and 'domination' on her right arm.

In literally inscribing institutional violence on her own body for *His-story*, Arahmaiani reflects upon the imbalanced relationship between the individual and the state in Indonesia, where vulnerable bodies are both pawn and victim in a struggle for power. As the artist has stated, she uses her body to represent subaltern subjects:

*I try to address the complex issue of violence – and how it merges with militarism, genocide, rape of women, abuse of the 'weak' and anarchy in general – into my performance. I don't know how effective this kind of work and action will be. But I know that I've got to do and to say something about it.*¹⁵

Importantly, whilst *His-story* deeply relies on the visualisation of the female body, it is not conceived as a blank canvas but rather as what Meiling Cheng has called a 'speaking sight'.¹⁶ In response to Peggy Phelan's call for feminism to bypass the politics of visibility altogether – to make the female body actively absent – Cheng argues that political representation must be construed both visually and textually.¹⁷ The subject should not become invisible, thereby risking suppression and erasure; rather, she should be made present through an articulation of image and voice. Similarly, I would argue that the visualisation of the female body in Arahmaiani's work must be understood in relation to her use of writing. In a context in which female bodies have all but disappeared from public purview, she makes hers visible as a social and political context – one constantly overdetermined by the violence of the state. As one of the documentation images of *His-story* states, 'there is a clear connection between the history [of] violence –

13 Unpublished manuscript held in the artist's archive.

14 See Henry Spiller, 'Ronggeng and Desire', *Sundanese Dance and Masculinity in West Java*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, pp.76–77.

15 Artist's statement, 2000, available in the artist's archive.

16 See Meiling Cheng, 'Renaming Untitled Flesh/Marking the politics of marginality', in Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (ed.), *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*, London: Routledge, 1999, pp.207–08.

17 See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996.







and the body'. Thus there can be no such thing as an 'unmarked' body, to borrow Phelan's term. The question is rather, how are women marked, and by whom?

Dayang Sumbi Rejects the Status Quo and *His-story* were both conceived during the Reformasi period, a small window of time when Indonesians experienced a sense of freedom following the collapse of the authoritarian New Order regime in May 1998. This period allowed Indonesians to explore, and even accept, critical, alternative views on women. Major group exhibitions of Indonesian women artists were staged during this period,¹⁸ featuring works by artists such as Mella Jaarsma, Titarubi and Dolorosa Sinaga which depicted previously sensitive issues such as female nudes, sexuality and domestic violence – although religious issues and the mass killings of 1965–66 remained untouched. During this period, the largest national newspaper, *Kompas*, ran a regular section on gender-related topics, reporting on issues that

would have been problematic to discuss on national media during the New Order. While the expectation that women should fulfil their roles as wives and mothers as part of their predestined fate (*kodrat*) has largely receded since the fall of Suharto, the notion of passive and controlled femininity persists in Indonesian society today, the control of women's bodies now being the prerogative of religious authorities rather than the state.¹⁹ Since 2001, for example, sharia by-laws in the province of Aceh have dramatically clamped down on women's rights, whilst a controversial anti-pornography law passed in 2008 has targeted the representation of women's bodies in the visual and performing arts.²⁰

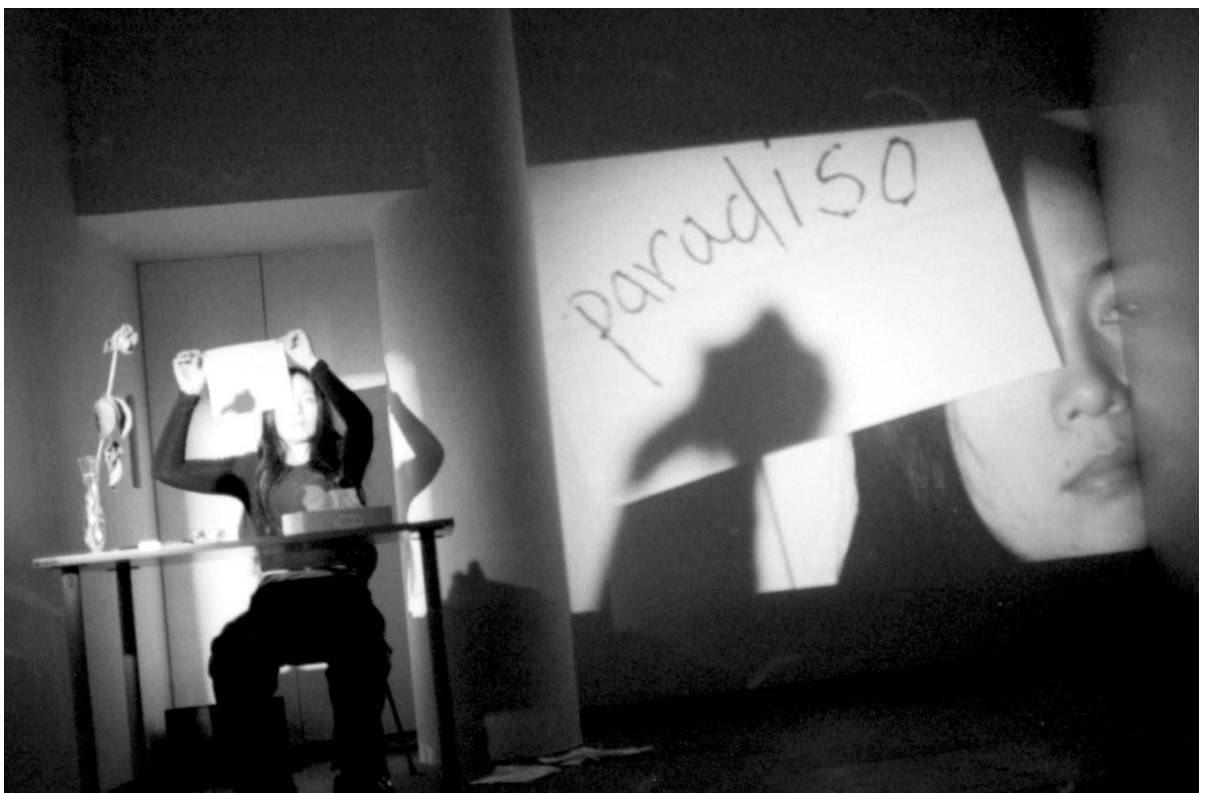
Arahmaiani has recently turned her attention once again to the way in which religion polices subjectivity. While her critique of the overdetermination of women's bodies has always been interlinked with critique of religious extremism, an incident in 2002 cast new light on the artist's

Above and opposite:
Arahmaiani,
His-story, 2000–01,
performance.
Courtesy the artist

18 These included large survey shows such as 'Pameran Seni Rupa Karya Perempuan' ('Women's Art Exhibition'), Bentara Budaya Jakarta, 17–28 May 2001; 'Perempuan dan Disseminasi Makna Ruang' ('Women and the Dissemination of Space'), National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta, 24 April–3 May 2001; and 'Pameran Seni Rupa Perempuan' ('Women's Art Exhibition'), TIM Gallery, Jakarta, 5–11 April 2003. Notable smaller thematic shows were Titarubi's solo show 'Bayang-bayang Maha Kecil' ('Shadows of the Tiniest Kind'), Cemara 6 Gallery, Jakarta, 15 March–14 April 2004; and 'Seduction (Boys Don't Cry)', Cemeti Art House, Yogyakarta, 19 June–7 July 2003.

19 See, for example, Julia Suryakusuma, 'Is state ibuism still relevant?', *Inside Indonesia*, edition 109, July–September 2012, available at <http://www.insideindonesia.org/is-state-ibuism-still-relevant-2> (last accessed on 24 July 2016).

20 See Pam Allen, 'Challenging Diversity?: Indonesia's Anti-Pornography Bill', *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 31, issue 2, 2007, pp. 101–15.





Arahmaiani, *Flag Project*, 2006–ongoing. Clockwise, from top left: Yogyakarta, 2009; Singapore, 2009; Berlin, 2006; Nagano, Japan, 2007; Sydney, 2007; Shenzhen, 2008; Borobudur, Central Java, 2007; Berlin, 2006. Courtesy the artist

relationship to Islam. During a stopover in the US en route to Canada, the artist, who did not have a transit visa, was detained and forced to spend the night in a hotel room accompanied by a male guard. The experience – which was reconstructed in her performance installation work *11 June 2002* at the Venice Biennale in 2003 – made her realise that whereas she was previously known as a female artist or Indonesian artist, she would now also be recognised for her Muslim identity.²¹ In subsequent works, she has sought to counter the stigmatisation of Islam and to defend the rights of religious and ethnic minorities across Asia. For her exhibition ‘I Love You (After Joseph Beuys’s Social Sculpture)’ at Singapore’s Esplanade in 2009, for example, Arahmaiani showed two projects addressing the ethnic tensions that have long plagued the city state.²² A series of soft and bright sculptures made from silk in the form of various *jawi* characters and reading ‘I Love You’, *I Love You (After Joseph Beuys Social Sculpture)* (2009) was made in collaboration with the silk-weaving Baan Krua Muslim community, of Cambodian descent, who have been targeted by the Thai government’s plans to regenerate areas of Bangkok.²³ In Singapore, Arahmaiani also staged an iteration of her long-term *Flag Project* (2006–ongoing),²⁴ for which the artist collaborates with different communities to make colourful flags, each emblazoned with a word; Arahmaiani and her collaborators then carry these in collective performances in public spaces. For this iteration, participants walked across the heavily commercialised and regulated space of the Esplanade arts complex, brandishing flags along the way with words such as ‘home’, ‘family’ and ‘freedom’ written in

Chinese, Tagalog and Malay, so as to raise awareness about the status of minorities in Singapore.

In this way, Arahmaiani’s engagement with the politics of women’s visibility continues to carry deep significance in Indonesia, even as her performances do not always reach the local constituencies she intends to address. For the artist, the struggle for women’s equality involves a class struggle, and she has repeatedly criticised the Indonesian academics and scholars whom she sees as affirming middle-class privilege.²⁵ Yet, her work operates within the very class structure she is trying to challenge.²⁶ Essentially, there is no ‘other’ kind of audience for Indonesian contemporary art within Indonesia, since contemporary art is predominantly made by and for the Indonesian middle-to-upper class, especially in light of the recent growth of the art market. Problematically, while Arahmaiani’s work bears witness to gender inequalities in Indonesia’s patriarchal society, its resonance as feminist art is diminished by its limited circulation within the country.

Yet the symbolic battle is also clearly far from over. From her early efforts to regain representative control over women’s bodies to her more recent interrogation of monolithic representations of Islam, Arahmaiani has mined the complex relationship of language, power and representation within Indonesian political and social life. If it is true that her work challenges the status quo, as Kee suggests, that challenge is in itself an attack against the binary confirmation/contestation that underpins curatorial and critical stereotypes.

- 21 See Iola Lenzi, ‘Context, content and meaning: threads of perception beyond the veil’, in I. Lenzi (ed.), *Stitching the Wound*, Bangkok: The Art Center at the Jim Thompson House, 2006, p.18.
- 22 Singapore has seen a number of race riots since the 1960s; the most recent took place in 2013. As of June 2015, the majority of the population was ethnic Chinese (73.4%), with Malay (13.3%) and Indian (9.1%) making up the rest. See ‘Population Trends 2015’, Department of Statistics Singapore, available at http://www.singstat.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/publications/publications_and_papers/population_and_population_structure/population2015.pdf (last accessed on 24 July 2016).
- 23 See Chaiwat Satha-Anand, ‘Defending Muslim Community, Strengthening Thai Society’, in I. Lenzi (ed.), *Stitching the Wound*, op. cit., pp.51–57. Arahmaiani’s consistent use of *jawi* script and the references to Javanese mythologies in her work reflect her strong interest in the hybrid form of Islam that emerged in Indonesia during the fourteenth century. She argues that early Islam fostered equality and tolerance, in contrast to the aristocratic Hindu Buddhist rulers, something that is lacking in Indonesia these days. Conversation with the artist, February 2013. See also Merle Ricklefs, ‘Non-indigenous Actors Old and New’, *A New History of Southeast Asia*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, pp.124–25.
- 24 Arahmaiani visited Tibet as part of her research for the group exhibition ‘Contemporaneity: Contemporary Art of Indonesia’ at the Museum of Contemporary Art Shanghai in 2010. Though her research was initially related to the *Flag Project*, her meetings there led her to develop an ongoing environmental project with Tibetan Buddhist monks from Lab village, Yushu region. See Arahmaiani Feisal, ‘My Second Life in Tibet’, *Art Asia Pacific*, issue 79, July–August 2012, available at http://trfineart.com/pdfs/reviews/0000/0505/AAP79_SecondLifeInTibet_Arahmaiani.pdf (last accessed on 24 July 2016).
- 25 Arahmaiani, ‘Kebudayaan itu Berkelamin’, in W. Adi, Sumartono et al. (ed.), *Aspek-aspek Seni Visual Indonesia: Politik dan Gender*, op. cit., pp.165–76.
- 26 *Ibid.*



Sunthorn Meesri,
bot bat sommut
(role play), 1993,
performance at Tha
Pae Gate, Chiang Mai.
All images courtesy
Uthit Atimana
and Gridthiya
Gaweeewong

Images Without Bodies: Chiang Mai Social Installation and the Art History of Cooperative Suffering

– Simon Soon

Our story begins with a photograph that Mit Jai Inn, one of the organisers of the Chiang Mai Social Installation (CMSI), shared with me. The image shows a line of people receding diagonally into the dark. It is night, and the mood seems festive and buoyant. Smiles are etched onto faces that are consciously posing for the camera. Many of the figures are carrying a piece of rock, and a rope seems to bind them to each other. Fleshing out the story behind the photograph, Jai Inn told me:

I organised a participatory walkabout around Chiang Mai on the last day of the Week of Cooperative Suffering in 1995, which took place from midnight until six in the morning. Everyone who joined the tour was made to carry a large object and participants were bound together for the duration of the walk by a rope. We walked from the Buddhasathan [also known as Chiang Mai Religion Practice Centre] to the night bazaar, a short distance away. There were about seventy to one hundred of us. We walked past a luxury hotel where a wedding celebration was taking place. We then walked past the red light district and solicitous bar girls. We proceeded through the slum where many Cambodian refugees were trying to rebuild their lives, and then through the various neighbourhoods that make up Chiang Mai. We finally ended our walk at the municipal abattoir, where pigs and cows are slaughtered. We stayed on and observed the scene. It was a narrative of great suffering – from dancing and celebration to death.¹

As the walkabout's participants passed through these various domains, the popular image of the Thai city – a tourist's version of a Chiang Mai defined by its middle-class – was upended.

Simon Soon looks to a series of DIY artist-led festivals in order to model a localised, non-Western approach to contemporary art and its histories.

They entered into spaces of uncertainty, where the city's divisions between social classes and communities were transgressed. Conversation amongst the group became anxiety-ridden at times, yet the rope that bound them together provided a sense that they were in this together, that they had each other to fall back on.² In many ways, it

also made them aware that their experience was constructed and mapped out in advance, like being part of a tour group, and therefore, in a sense, illusory. The large rocks they were made to carry would have felt exceedingly heavy by the time the tour ended, at daybreak. The journey was meant to be both mentally and physically exhausting.

If all that remains of the artwork is the photographic image and the stories, then what is the object of art history? Photographs are insufficient in that they speak as documents without narrative. According to Siegfried Kracauer, the photographic image does not function as a mnemonic storehouse but rather depletes over time into a surfeit of details; it 'captures only the residuum that history has discharged'.³ For an image to make sense, one often has to rely on the account of someone connected to the event (Jai Inn's narrative above, for instance). It is with these considerations in mind that I wish to propose the art history of social practice as something akin to a set of 'images without bodies'. This term is moreover

1 Conversation with Mit Jai Inn, 2 February 2014.

2 See Thasnai Sethaseree, 'Overlapping Tactics and Practices at the Interstices of Thai Art', unpublished doctoral thesis, Chiang Mai: Chiang Mai University, 2011, p.193. Sethaseree dates this event to 1992, although the Week of Cooperative Suffering was not held until January 1995.

3 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Photography' (1927, trans. Thomas Y. Levin), *Critical Inquiry*, vol.19, no.3, 1993, p.429.

used to convey a method or procedure for the art historian, whose task is to reconfigure such histories into potentialities in order to sustain their inherent multiplicity. Of course, scholars writing on the history of performance art have long debated what constitutes their object of study, and such questions are echoed in more recent debates around the genre of art-making known as social practice. For example, Grant Kester speaks of the dialogical nature of such projects; Miwon Kwon describes the precarious nature of site specificity as a medium-generative discourse; Nicolas Bourriaud writes on sociality as a significant facet of scenarios framed in the context of art; and Claire Bishop, as a rejoinder to Kester's and Bourriaud's approaches, favours the agonistic dimension of participatory projects that reactivates provocation as a key element within the avant-garde lineage she identifies.⁴ In all these accounts, a specific dimension is isolated from a whole range of activities and processes that constitute 'social practice', which is then contextualised in relation to established twentieth-century avant-garde trajectories of art history.

Hence, an obvious limitation of these frameworks: the partiality of such histories and their reductive nature. The example of CMSI – just one in a diverse landscape of non-Western artistic practices – immediately invites alternative approaches. How else could we think of a history of social practice so that its complex matrix is not entirely reduced within the narrative of European and North American avant-gardism? Where could CMSI sit other than on the tail end of a global diffusion that began in Europe? Indeed, shouldn't the methodology be reversed? By using one case study as a focal point, is it possible to more accurately flesh out a different kind of history – a history from within context?

Chiang Mai Social Installation in Context

Chiang Mai Social Installation was a series of four art festivals that took place during the 1990s across a number of public and private non-gallery spaces in Chiang Mai. Principal organisers such as Mit Jai Inn and Uthit Atimana (with operational support from Navin Rawanchaikul and spiritual support from Montien Boonma) conceived it as an art festival that would embed itself within the social fabric of Chiang Mai city. By most accounts, the idea of situating contemporary artworks outside of conventional gallery spaces was spurred by Jai Inn's visit to Documenta 8 in 1987 – which explored the 'social dimension' of art – while he was a student at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. The name Chiang Mai Social Installation, or Chiang Mai Jat Wang Sang Khom, came to be adopted from the second edition onwards. *Sang khom* translates roughly as 'a public or a society', and, according to Thasnai Sethaseree, whose doctoral thesis is one of the very few extended studies of CMSI, '*Jat wang* relates to arrangement of a thing and placing it, it is in a sense a form of "making a space for the public".⁵

Each edition was different in tone and orientation. The first, 'Art Festival: Temples and Cemeteries', was held at the end of 1992, and essentially consisted of sculptural artworks shown in temple grounds and cemeteries. The festival's evolving aims were sharpened with the second edition, a year later, which moved beyond sacred spaces into the secular. Artists began to enter into a conversation with the city, holding exhibitions and performances in empty shops and local businesses (a dental clinic was one early instance), as well as using the public square outside Tha Phae Gate, one of the main entryways into the historic core of Chiang Mai city, as a performance venue and gathering point. As the festival grew with later editions, it became more ambitious in its attempts to engage with the city's many publics, from the homeless to small business owners to political activists: projects took place at hospitals, department stores, brothels, the canal, the bridges, even the museum.⁶ The roster of participating artists also expanded to include artists from all over the world. Yet throughout, the approach remained self-funded and DIY; for the most part artists covered their own production and travel costs, and public spaces were often occupied without permission.

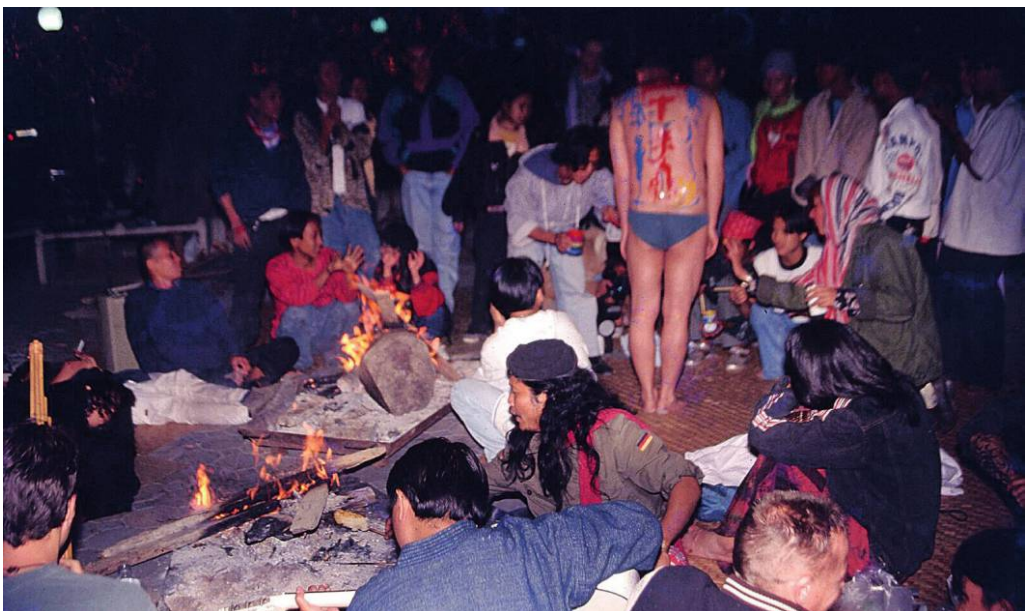
The genesis of CMSI is intimately connected to Thailand's modern art history and the institutional challenges that it faced by the early 1990s. European artists had been employed in

Performance as part of the third Week of Cooperative Suffering, Tha Pae Gate, Chiang Mai, 1997

Midnight walking tour conducted by Mit Jai Inn as part of the first Week of Cooperative Suffering, Chiang Mai, 1995

Performance by Jian Jun Xi, Tha Pae Gate, Chiang Mai, 1996

4 See Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013; Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004; Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (1998, trans. Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods and Mathieu Copeland), Dijon: Presses du Réel, 1998; and Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London: Verso, 2012.
5 Conversation with T. Sethaseree, 3 February 2014. Doctoral theses by Sethaseree, cited in note 2, and Pandit Chanrochanakit ('The Siamese Diorama and Thai National Imaginary in Contemporary Thai Art', Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, 2006) contain the most extensive readings of CMSI to date.
6 See T. Sethaseree, 'Overlapping Tactics and Practices at the Interstices of Thai Art', *op. cit.*, p.8.





the Siamese court from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The Italian-born Corrado Feroci, better known by his adopted name as a Thai citizen, Silpa Bhirasri, arrived in Siam in 1923 to teach sculpture in the fine arts department of the royal court and would become widely recognised as the father of Thai modern art. He played an instrumental role in the establishment of Silpakorn University in Bangkok in 1943 and the National Art Exhibition in 1949, institutions that, in effect, established an orthodoxy for modern art in Thailand. Following the radical student uprising of 1973, which ousted the military regime that had been in place since 1957, the United Artists' Front of Thailand was established – an arts organisation that responded to the revival and dissemination of Thai Marxist Chit Phumisak's call for an 'art for life' (*Sinlapa Phue Chiwit*).⁷ While he derided European modernism, Phumisak did not prescribe a stylistic model, other than calling for social revaluation as central to the artistic paradigm.

In 1975 the United Artists' Front of Thailand responded to this call, insisting on the democratic opening of Thai public space by staging a temporary exhibition of billboard artworks along Ratchadamnoen Avenue, a historically significant thoroughfare in Bangkok.⁸ Ratchadamnoen Avenue had been constructed in the early twentieth century at the behest of King Chulalongkorn to connect the Grand Palace to the Dusit Palace. Subsequently, under the military regimes of Plaek Phibunsongkhram (between 1938–44 and 1948–57), which were antagonistic towards the monarchy, a so-called 'Democracy Monument' was erected on the avenue in 1939.⁹ The Monument's significance continues to be contested across the political divide: while it stands as a symbol of military rule for some, progressive anti-militarist and conservative causes alike have rallied around it.¹⁰ The regime and the monarchy established a power-sharing arrangement from 1957 onwards, but this came to an end with the latter's tacit support of the 1973 protests, which converged at the Democracy Monument.

Billboard artwork by Singnoi Futwatsathaphon, Ratchadamnoen Avenue, Bangkok, 1975. Courtesy Pridi Banomyong Institute/ National Archives of Thailand

7 See Chit Phumisak, *Sinlapa Phua chiwit, sinlapa phua prachachon* (*Art for Life, Art for the People*, originally published between 1955–57), Bangkok: Samnakphim Nokhuk, 1997. For an introduction to the life of Chit Phumisak, see Craig Reynolds, *Thai Radical Discourse: The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987, pp.9–40.

8 See *Phapsinlapa khatao kanmueang duean tula* (*The Images of the Cut Out of the October Politics*), Bangkok: 14 October Memorial, 2003.

9 See Chaitri Prakitnonthakan, 'Memory and Power on the Ratchadamnoen Avenue', *prachatai.com* [online newspaper], 15 January 2008, available at prachatai.com/english/node/484 (last accessed on 2 January 2016).

10 For a detailed reading, see Apinan Poshyananda, *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p.41.

Hence, the United Artists' Front's 1975 outdoor exhibition of billboard cut-outs was a celebratory reclamation of a significant site where political contestation had taken place, and in this way, an important precedent for CMSI. Soon after this, the monarchy turned against the student movement and returned its support to the military, leading to the 1976 student massacre and re-establishment of military rule.¹¹ Many students, including members of the United Artists' Front, dispersed into the countryside. Only once the political situation had stabilised, around 1978, did many of them slowly return to the capital city. By 1979, the regrouped United Artists' Front of Thailand initiated the Open Art Exhibition of Thailand, as a kind of 'Salon des Indépendants' to counter the dominance of the long-established and artistically conservative National Art Exhibition of Thailand.¹² By the late 1980s, the faculty of fine art at Chiang Mai University began to actively position their art school as an alternative to Silpakorn University in Bangkok;¹³ other institutions were also beginning to challenge Silpakorn's stranglehold, including newly established art schools within Bangkok such as Chulalongkorn University and Srinakharinwirot University. In reaction to the close association of Thai neo-traditional painting with corporate Thailand, individual artists began raising questions regarding the nationalist characteristics of contemporary Thai art under the influence of Silpakorn. It is also important to point out that many of the 1970s radicals did eventually become, from the 1990s on, the most strident promoters of royalist conservatism. In light of these fits and starts, the discontinuities of twentieth-century art in Thailand should be emphasised here; all the more so, I will suggest, because the disbandment of CMSI would follow just such a path.

In effect, these historical precedents demonstrate three things: first, the emergence of a political discourse in Thailand surrounding the activation of public space as a site for artistic practice; second, germinating from the dispersion brought about by the student massacre in 1976, the gradual realisation amongst the cultural intelligentsia of a need to decentralise from Bangkok; and third, through the various challenges to Silpakorn, a collective re-evaluation of art and its institutions. Consequently, in the early 1990s numerous unorthodox art movements began building towards critical mass.

If Chiang Mai became a default location for radical intellectuals from the 1970s–90s, during the same period the city also enjoyed something of an economic surge in the form of tourism, compounded by an unprecedented scale of government and private investment, spurring the heritage industry. For the city's engagement with the global cultural current of contemporary art, these infrastructures laid the groundwork for what anthropologist Anna Tsing has called an 'economy of appearance', defined as a rhetoric of spectacle centred on the potential of profitability.¹⁴ Insofar as the founders of CMSI were initially able to draw on Chiang Mai's newfound image in order to fashion an international image for themselves, it soon became clear that another mode of operation would grow out of CMSI and thwart such cultural ambitions.

Cooperative Suffering

Chiang Mai Social Installation might be said to mark the beginning of a 'contemporary' moment within Thai art history.¹⁵ The few existing studies of CMSI touch on the broader socio-historical forces that emerged as counters to Thai modernism, or as strategies to critique what Pandit Chanrochanakit, in his consideration of the Foucauldian performance of Thai nation-statehood, came to term the 'Siamese diorama'.¹⁶ The artistic lineage of this critique is often couched in relation to a principle figure, the German artist Joseph Beuys.

11 See Sitthidet Rohitsauk, *Klum sinlapawathanatham nai prathet Thai: bot samruat sathanaphaplaekhwamkhlua nwaiaichuangpiphuthatsakrat 2516–2530* (Art and Culture Groups in Thailand: The Exploration of Status and Movement from 1973 to 1987), Bangkok: Srinakharinwirot University, 2009.

12 See *Sinlapa 2522 gaansadaeng sinlapakam haeng prathetthai khrang thi nueng* (First Open Art Exhibition of Thailand 1979) (exh. cat.), Bangkok: Art Exhibition of Thailand, 1979.

13 For example, the late Montien Boonma joined the university at this time, following a stint in Europe where he was exposed to *arte povera* and Joseph Beuys. Boonma began revisiting some of the unquestioned legacies of Silpakorn University.

14 See Anna Tsing, 'Inside the Economy of Appearances', *Public Culture*, vol.12, no.1, 2000, pp.115–44.

15 There are suggestions of this in Sethaseree's thesis: 'In this regard, for "Thai Modernism" (*khuam kid samaimaibabthai*), the value of assets that the Thai nation state gains are made quietly possible by forces of two major institutional logics – the monarchy and Buddhist monkhood (*sangha*). ... Faced with such a situation, Thai contemporary artists after the 1990s onwards have attempted to set themselves free from the restraint of the artistic practices [embedded] in the domain of national imaginary and culture'; 'This dialogue can be understood in terms of the process of cultural hybridity that gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable – a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation taking place in a third space.' T. Sethaseree, 'Overlapping Tactics and Practices at the Interstices of Thai Art', *op. cit.*, pp.3, 5 and 253.

Here, the term ‘social installation’ is said to be an updated version of Beuys’s ‘social sculpture’ to meet the new demands of the 1990s.

Though the organisers of CMSI have mentioned Beuys as a significant influence, such a genealogy remains unsatisfactory. This is partly due to well-known tensions within Beuys’s social-aesthetic model; in particular, the charismatic and singular figure of the artist in Beuys’s work stands in stark contrast to CMSI’s fundamentally collective paradigm.¹⁷ While most works shown in the festival can be attributed to specific artists, when one speaks to former organising committee members such as Atimana and Jai Inn, they continue to downplay individual artworks in favour of the event itself, to the extent that the event-form is privileged.¹⁸ Moreover, CMSI has survived in the public imagination less as an event attributable to a specific instigator or founder. Hence, CMSI is collective in a double sense: it privileges neither individual authors nor individual works.



Most of all, what marks CMSI’s departure from the utopian goal of Beuys’s social sculpture is the Week of Cooperative Suffering. This cluster of events, I believe, worked to counteract the main festival, and would be the conceptual catalyst that eventually led to CMSI’s demise. Before the Week of Cooperative Suffering was established, CMSI’s focus had been on staging artworks within public spaces. Yet, according to Atimana, this model was soon perceived as insufficient, especially as the event began to gain attention from the international art world. The first Week of Cooperative Suffering came about through a period of reflection about the aims and direction of CMSI, as well the frustration of dealing with the administrative work of running the festival. With this smaller ‘satellite’ project, the

Installation as part of the second Week of Cooperative Suffering, Tha Pae Gate, Chiang Mai, 1997

16 See P. Chanrochanakit, ‘The Siamese Diorama and Thai National Imaginary in Contemporary Thai Art’, *op. cit.*

17 For example, Benjamin Buchloh has commented that Beuys ‘dilutes and dissolves the conceptual precision of Duchamp’s readymade by reintegrating the object into the most traditional and naïve context of representation of meaning: the idealist metaphor.’ B.H.D. Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, ‘Beuys at the Guggenheim’, *October*, no.12, Spring 1980, p.39. See also B.H.D. Buchloh, ‘Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol, Preliminary Notes for A Critique’, *Artforum*, January 1980, pp.35-43. Critics such as Jan Verwoert have also spoken of the authoritarian nature of Beuys’s staging of pedagogy. See J. Verwoert, ‘The Boss: On the Unresolved Question and Authority in Joseph Beuys’ Oeuvre and Image’, *e-flux journal*, no.1, December 2008, available at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-boss-on-the-unresolved-question-of-authority-in-joseph-beuys-oeuvre-and-public-image/> (last accessed on 13 February 2014).

18 This contrasts sharply with the way in which the event has been presented retrospectively by certain successful participating artists, who have focussed on their individual contributions in the context of their own art practice. See, for example, Navin Rawanchaikul, *Comm*, New York: Phillip Galgiani, 1999.

organisers attempted to direct their creative energy towards very different concerns. As Atimana notes, ‘What the people hate, we love. We made many people angry.’¹⁹

The first Week of Cooperative Suffering took place in January 1995, between editions of CMSI, and ran from midnight until dawn over a series of nights. In explaining this specific time frame, Jai Inn falls back on a Buddhist story:

When the Buddha was teaching, he was preaching to different constituents of the world at different times. During the day, he taught mankind. At midnight, he taught the Devas (Gods). Some of the Gods even debated with him. That’s why I thought midnight is a good time to initiate a different kind of conversation. We started at six in the evening[and went] until six in the morning. After midnight, there were only drunk people.’²⁰



Wall of Tha Pae Gate,
Chiang Mai, 1997

The Week built on a series of events called Midnight Socrates, for which a bonfire was built on regular evenings at Tha Phae Gate, where people would sit around and talk – for example, professors from different departments at Chiang Mai University who did not normally interact with one another.²¹ Midnight Socrates was later formalised as Midnight University, and went on to become an important forum for alternative education. But whereas Midnight Socrates and Midnight University were discursive and pedagogic, the Week was more event-based and performative; rather than engaging an audience, it often aimed to shock and provoke; or to entertain, not unlike the night-market performances staged by local stall owners to sell their products. In addition to a session of Midnight University, the first Week of Cooperative Suffering included: a revue of provocative performances and interventions, a night for ‘contemporary sound and light’ (a film screening), a night for installations and a nighttime art bazaar.

The first Week was also the context in which the rock-carrying walkabout (as described at the beginning of this essay) took place. The event was described in the programme as ‘midnight *pah-pa*’, or ‘midnight forest robe’, a reference to a ceremonial offering from the Thai laity to the Buddhist monastic institution. According to tradition, people would hang

¹⁹ Conversation with U. Atimana, 3 February 2014.

²⁰ Conversation with M. Jai Inn, 2 February 2014.

²¹ The first year, for instance, focussed on science, art and philosophy, and tried to combine these different fields.



Artist discussion with Ray Langenbach, Jay Koh and others at the third Chiang Mai Social Installation, Jed Yod Temple, Chiang Mai, 1995

rags in the forest as an offering to monks, who would stitch them together for their robes. In more recent times, the ceremony has taken the form of a collection of donations to monastic causes offered along with a robe. The midnight forest robe adopted this traditional symbol of giving while subverting the monetary logic that dominates its contemporary form – the participatory experience was a method to stitch together a gritty tableau, as if the city itself were made of old rags. The midnight forest robe is also exemplary of the very idea of cooperative suffering, since the collective dimension here engendered a crisis of faith. At the time, the Week of Cooperative Suffering was sometimes translated as ‘Angst Week’ – and it was angst that would drive CMSI to ultimately re-evaluate its goals.

The organisers’ anxieties in experimenting with the city would play out in the third CMSI, later in 1995. This was the first time the Week of Cooperative Suffering was introduced into the main festival. With the participation of artists from all over the world, this was by far the best-documented CMSI festival, receiving wide press coverage both locally and internationally, and documented by artists in the form of zines and video recordings. Its DIY attitude brought in a different global demographic in comparison to the kind of exhibition spectacle that would put Southeast Asian art on the global map in the 1990s.²² The Week of Cooperative Suffering could therefore be understood as a process of making visible the aporia of the globalising trajectory of CMSI. As a dialectic foil to the main event, it was also a mechanism to reflect the organisers’ thinking process as they felt out, and eventually came to terms with, the logic of the global cultural spectacle.

Welcome to Thailand

The expansion of CMSI as an arts festival ran parallel to the festivalisation of the culture industry, as seen in the proliferation of Asian biennials in the 1990s. Prior to this, there were only four biennial-type exhibitions in Asia.²³ Beginning with the inauguration of Biennale Jogja in 1988, the 1990s saw the creation of another eight biennials in the region, signalling the moment at which Asian cities began to see the biennial as a viable format to position themselves as regional, if not global, artistic centres.²⁴ This did not go unnoticed by those involved in CMSI. An observation by American-born performance artist and theorist Ray Langenbach, as part of an artists’ discussion at the 1995 iteration of CMSI, is worth quoting at length:

22 For instance, ‘Contemporary Art in Asia: Tradition/Tensions’, Asia Society, New York, October 1996–January 1997, curated by Apinan Poshyananda; and the Singapore Art Museum’s inaugural exhibition ‘Modernity and Beyond’, January–April 1996.

23 Tokyo Biennale (1952–90, eighteen editions), Triennale-India / The Triennale of Contemporary World Art (1968–2005, eleven editions), Asian Art Biennale Bangladesh (1981–2006, twelve editions) and Jakarta Biennale (1974–2015, sixteen editions).

24 Biennale Jogja (1988–present, twelve editions), Osaka Triennale (1990–2001, ten editions), Taipei Biennial (1992–present, eleven editions), Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (1993–present, seven editions), Gwangju Biennale (1995–present, nine editions), Shanghai Biennale (1996–present, nine editions), Busan Biennale (1998–present, eight editions) and Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale (1999–present, four editions).

At the heart of this discussion and the work we ... do is a kind of contradiction. I represent a propaganda system. ... No matter what my personal view is, I am still that object of propaganda and I carry an ideology wherever I go. ... As artists ... many of us are attracted to this field [because] there is the possibility of unalienated production. But the problem we face in large part [today is that] we end up being the R&D arm of the new commodities that are produced by our society. ... So however radicalised our position ... it will be subsumed into the capitalist system, which is a global belief system now. As performance artists, we have even put our bodies into the commodity system. ... The ideology of my culture is that I buy you, you buy me. So ... all I can say is ... welcome to America... but it's welcome to america... welcome to merica, welcometumerica, welcometomer, tuh ... welcometuhtuh, welcometothailand, welcome to Thailand, welcome to Thailand.²⁵

This slippage in utterance neatly spells out the transformation of the national situation into an international one. It is also an acute observation of the limits of the art festival model under such conditions. After 1995, CMSI lasted only one more edition. According to Atimana, by its third many of the organisers realised that CMSI had outlived its usefulness. If it were to continue, it would be as fossilised cultural spectacle.

It is significant that CMSI came to an end at the very moment that Asian biennials began to proliferate – indeed, at the very moment when CMSI itself was gaining traction on an international level. In the late 1990s, Jai Inn would leave Chiang Mai to start his own business in the Isan region, while Atimana would start running the Chiang Mai University Art

***Chiang Mai Social
Installation is collective in
a double sense: it privileges
neither individual authors
nor individual works.***

Museum and teaching at the university, later leading a media arts and design programme. Thus, CMSI's demise was not so much a failure to sustain the event on an administrative level as it was a pointed reaction against the festival morphology, a rejection of a certain typology of the spectacular that consumes any space for critical engagement, and of the American-Thai cultural enmesh-

ment (as enunciated by Langenbach) that would parallel the appearance of a globalising art world and its serviceable cookie-cutter biennial oecumene.

More importantly, it would seem that CMSI's endgame rejects the very condition of coeval equivalence between contexts, which historians such as Terry Smith have taken to mark art production and reception under the condition of global contemporaneity.²⁶ Against such logic, CMSI's withdrawal suggests an affirmation of its position within a constellation of regional histories, unfolding unevenly, at different speeds. Rather than being absorbed into a 'global' contemporary moment, CMSI asserted an understanding of contemporaneity as regional, non-coeval and multiple, arriving at different moments according to specific local conditions. And like its arrival, its dissolution and reconfiguration also speak to this condition of non-coevality. The decision to stop could hence be understood as a protest against the liberal concept of 'plurality' itself – and the concomitant idea of multi-temporal coexistence – which ultimately reflects an underlying structural homogeneity despite its appeal to diversity and decentralisation. For the founders of CMSI, the only possible way out of this 'game' was to stage a total withdrawal.

Yet, it is not possible to qualify CMSI as a culturally unique phenomenon. By and large, one is able to detect similar gestures taking place across a number of locations across Southeast Asia, each demonstrating similar social practice typologies. It is in this sense that a number of other artist-led collective/event-based happenings across Southeast Asia could be compared in order to shape a regional-historical context in relation to the desire of artists to create new arenas of exchange and encounter.²⁷

25 R. Langenbach, video recording, 1995. Langenbach's collection of video documentation is held by Asia Art Archive. Langenbach also observes in this video: 'Interesting that [CMSI] attracted Western artists who spoke primarily on new age themes of art and life [and] still carry some form of exoticism, such as the male Western artist who talked about unity between art and life in Bali earlier in the discussion; whereas the Thai artists were trying to debate on questions of the practical and social use of art versus the utopianism of art.'

26 See, for example, Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents*, London: Laurence King Publishing, 2011.



Exhibition of photographs taken by visitors at the fourth Chiang Mai Social Installation, Tha Pae Gate, Chiang Mai, 1997

Library installation by Navin Rawanchaikul as part of the second Chiang Mai Social Installation, 1993

Sculpture with performance by Supachai Sartsara at the opening of the first Chiang Mai Social Installation, Tha Pae Gate, Chiang Mai, 1991

This essay enters into the discussion by suggesting that another model of art history for Chiang Mai Social Installation is possible, encouraging a kind of lateral mapping instead of an over-reliance on a chronological canon. For if the history we write is a history for our time, then this lateral history – that would map the event comparatively in relation to other undertakings within the region of Southeast Asia – could offer a different kind of spatial narrative, one that is concrete and public, and yet at the same time strategically disembodied and multivalent.

Images Without Bodies

I have already proposed the notion of ‘images without bodies’ as a means towards historicising such constellations of activity. The materials that survive are less representations than perspectives – interviews, photographs and videos amongst other ephemera; snapshots and afterthoughts, which take on many afterlives. Analogous to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of ‘bodies without organs’, the work of art history should hence be understood as drawing from this reservoir of possible formations to return the actual event into a state of potentiality – unanchored, in this case, by the historical circumstances that shaped the event’s birth and eventual demise. These are the very same questions that historians of performance and social practice in other contexts grapple with.

Rather than obtain contemporaneous purchase for CMSI through the lineage of the twentieth-century European avant-garde, I have sketched two alternative and complementary possibilities. I have offered a preliminary diachronic sketch stemming from a Thai leftist lineage, which connects the motivations and sympathies of CMSI to the historical gambits of Chit Phumisak and the United Artists’ Front of Thailand. Chit’s appeals to ‘art for life’ resonate with the claim made by Atimana of being a culturalist rather than an artist,²⁸ which is in turn revealing of the dialectic that spelt out CMSI’s endgame.

I have also suggested a form of critical regionalism – a comparison via a constellation of case studies.²⁹ Rather than being a pre-existing political unit of examination, the ‘region’ here emerges from a set of specific local contexts and temporary contingencies. Like the very concept of cooperative suffering, this is more about advancing forms of momentary allegiance than erecting geo-political boundaries, to sustain the view that art historical trajectories are always already multiple. As Ahmad Mashadi has observed, ‘Regionality need not be seen simply as a desire for an imagined fraternity. Enmeshing practices, histories and ideals into a crucible of dialogue dismantles the frames and assumptions, unpacking national categories and allowing for cycles of formation and deconstruction.’³⁰

A comparative history of this nature is, then, an attempt to seek affinity beyond the confines of the nation state (argued by some scholars to have become art history’s Hegelian unconscious³¹) and to allow for new, collective critical sightlines to develop. It is, indeed, a form of cooperative suffering, addressing a kind of knowledge transformation stemming from patience and labour, doubt and angst – and stubbornly local. Like the binding together of the participants from various backgrounds in the walkabout described by Jai Inn, this offers a path that traverses boundaries.

27 Some contemporaneous examples from the region emerging in the late 1980s and early 90s include Baguio International Arts Festival in the Philippines, The Artists Village in Singapore and Binal Experimental Arts in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

28 Conversation with U. Atimana, 3 February 2014.

29 See Kenneth Frampton, ‘Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance’, in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1983. Frampton’s concept, which was first applied to architecture, resonated with visual art in Southeast Asia as well, particularly Ismail Zain’s thinking. See I. Zain, ‘Towards a Utopian Paradigm: A Matter of Contingencies and Displacement’, in Delia Paul and Sharifah Fatimah Zubir (ed.), *Traditional Aesthetics in Visual Arts, 1st ASEAN Symposium on Aesthetics, Proceedings of Symposium held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia National Art Gallery, on 24-27 October 1989*, Kuala Lumpur: ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information 1989, p.23.

30 Ahmad Mashadi, ‘Moments of Regionality: Negotiating Southeast Asia’, *Crossings: Philippine Works from the Singapore Art Museum*, Singapore and Makati City: Singapore Art Museum and Ayala Foundation, 2004, pp.25-39.

31 See Keith Moxey, ‘Art History’s Hegelian Unconscious: Naturalism and Nationalism in the Study of Early Netherlandish Painting’, in Mark Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (ed.), *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp.25-51.

Chiang Mai Social Installation is the point of departure for the two-day symposium ‘Regions of the Contemporary: Transnational Art Festivals and Exhibitions in 1990s Southeast Asia’, University of Melbourne, 5-7 November 2016, organised by Afterall in collaboration with the School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne, which will test ideas for forthcoming books in Afterall’s *Exhibition Histories* series. The author and editors would like to thank David Teh for his feedback during the development of this essay.







Tania Bruguera, *El susurro de Tatlin #6 (versión para La Habana)* (*Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana version)*), 2009, stage, podium, microphones, one loudspeaker inside and one outside of the building, two persons on a military outfit, one white dove, one minute free of censorship per speaker, 200 disposable cameras with flash. Stills from the video documentation of the performance at the 10th Havana Biennale, Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam, Havana, 29 March 2009. Courtesy Studio Bruguera

Previous spread: Tania Bruguera, *El susurro de Tatlin #5 (Tatlin's Whisper #5)*, 2008, mounted police, crowd control techniques, audience. Photograph: Sheila Burnett. Courtesy Studio Bruguera and Tate Modern, London

How to Make Art with a Jackhammer: A Conversation with Tania Bruguera

– W.J.T. Mitchell

I first met Tania Bruguera when she joined the faculty of the University of Chicago in 2004. We immediately hit it off. Her energy, originality and passion for her work was obvious, but right alongside that was a refreshing candour about uncertainties and doubts, and a refreshing modesty about what art and artists are capable of. As our friendship matured, she invited me to come to Cuba for a week to give lectures on 'art and activism' to her Cátedra Arte de Conducta (Behaviour Art School, 2002–09) in Havana. I hesitated over this because I regard myself primarily as a scholar, not an activist, and most of my attention to the role of art and visual culture in politics has been focussed on the US and Israel/Palestine. So I asked Tania if it would be okay for me to bring along a pair of real activists: my dear friends and next-door neighbours, Bill Ayers and Bernardine Dohrn. She immediately agreed to this, and proposed that my wife, Janice Misurell-Mitchell, a composer, performer and activist, join up as well. So our little 'gang of four' went to Havana in the fall of 2007.

W.J.T. Mitchell speaks to Tania Bruguera about the relationship between art and activism, play and use, loss and utopia.

Janice gave master classes in improvisation, musical text-setting, avant-garde flute and vocal techniques. I talked about the imagery of the 'War on Terror' in the US and the concurrent anti-war movement. Because of Bernardine's long relationship with Cuba, going back to the days when a Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) delegation came to cut cane and meet with Vietnamese activists, we were also able to arrange separate, parallel meetings with some of the 'elders' of the Cuban Revolution, such as Ricardo Alarcón, President of the National Assembly at the time of our visit, as well as with intellectuals associated with Casa de

las Américas.¹ Most importantly, we had a chance to see Tania's inspirational effect on a whole generation of young artists who were producing amazing work in very difficult conditions. Our collaborations with Tania continued in subsequent years with appearances at Our Literal Speed events in Karlsruhe and Chicago in 2008–09. We quickly learned that to be part of a Bruguera performance is a bit of a high-wire act, with moments of risk, surprise and revelation, a vivid sense of being in the present. Not a simple pleasure, then, but a kind of delight in feeling the floor drop away beneath you.

Since leaving Chicago for Paris, New York and elsewhere, Tania has continued her path-breaking work as a performance artist who understands the power of art to provoke critical thought and the dawning of new insights. She does this both through one-time events (reading Hannah Arendt all night over the noise of jackhammers) and long-term projects such as Immigrant Movement International (2010–15), the Asociación de Arte Útil (2013–ongoing) archive and her newly founded Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt / Institute of Artivism (2016–ongoing) in Havana. Tania's life, has, in effect, merged with art at so many levels that it is hard to know any more where its boundaries are.

W.J.T. Mitchell: I want to start with a stupid question. How old were you when you discovered you wanted to be an artist?

Tania Bruguera: Fifteen years old. I knew earlier, but at fifteen I had to defend my decision because my parents didn't want me to be an artist.

WJTM: 'You will never make a living'?

TB: Exactly, but with a moralistic bent. 'You will never make a living, plus art involves degenerate people.' It's funny because I was

1 See my 'Havana Diary: Cuba's Blue Period', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 34, issue 3, Spring 2008, pp. 601–11.

very good at science, so they wanted me to be a scientist – something respectable and useful.

WJTM: You might have made a good scientist, a creative one anyway. Are there any other moments over the past twenty or thirty years when you felt that you were at a turning point, when you had to redefine what you do?

TB: Sure. One such moment was when I decided to start doing performance, when I was eighteen. Before, I had tried printmaking, which suited me because it made me question the idea of authorship and the unique object, then painting, but I wasn't very good at it, then sculpture and video... But I get bored very quickly with everything. And then I found performance and said to myself, 'Yes, that's one thing I want to do.'

WJTM: How did that come about?

TB: It started with the Ana Mendieta project, in 1985. Ana Mendieta was one of few female role models in Cuba at the time, and I wanted to get to know her. She was supposed to come to Cuba, but then she died – or was killed, but that's another story.² So I started redoing some of her pieces. I think my work has a lot to do with loss, so in a sense I used art as a way to find her. In any case, during this process I discovered that I really enjoyed doing her performances. What I liked was that it was just like life. Up until that point, making art had made me feel uneasy because it felt somehow artificial, in that it involved isolating something from its context. With performance, it was just like living life, but in a meaningful way. And then, as I grew older, I became interested in the idea that you can never possess a performance, or you can only possess it as a memory, and I really like the idea that anybody could have my performances.

WJTM: What about documentation?

TB: I have always been very bad at documenting my work. I have lost so many videotapes and negatives! But to be honest it's not that I'm bad at it, I never really cared about documentation, it's almost as if a performance's afterlife wasn't my responsibility.

WJTM: It's like this interview. The first time we did it, I lost the recording. We are kindred spirits, both bad at documentation. So Mendieta was a big influence on you, but was there another punctuating point, when you decide to do your own performances?

TB: Another punctuating moment was when all my friends left Cuba in the late 1980s, early 90s. Hundreds of artists left around that time because there was a tightening of cultural policy after the relative freedom that artists were allowed during the 'rectification' process (our version of the Russian perestroika). There was a moment when it seemed that things were going to change, but in actual fact it was all in preparation for Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to Cuba [in 1989], it was not for real. What happened during this interim period in the late 1980s and early 90s, though, was that a lot of institutions in Cuba – which by the way were run by women – started giving more freedom to artists, so artists started looking not at social phenomena themselves but at their ontology: who created the problem, why was this happening, who was responsible, etc. So for the first time they were able to transfer their politics to their art, and that had the biggest influence in my work, because then I discovered something that hopefully I still do, which is to create gestures rather than products. At that time, you could see exhibitions where maybe the work was not so perfectly done but you got the idea and, most importantly, you got the energy. I understood then the energy that goes into the work, and the fact that actually energy is art.

WJTM: This is what William Blake says: 'Energy is the only life and is from the body.'

TB: There you go, I'm a Blake follower.

WJTM: You are obviously a Blake person! So when all of your friends left at the end of the 1980s, why didn't you leave as well? Were you tempted?

TB: I wanted to finish my university degree and then immediately after that, in 1992, I tried to leave but for one reason or another it didn't happen. But then the experience of losing my friends made me do a newspaper, *Memoria de la Postguerra* [Postwar

2 Ana Mendieta died on 8 September 1985 after falling from the window of the 34th-floor apartment in Manhattan that she shared with her husband, Carl Andre. Andre was tried and then acquitted of her murder in 1988, after much evidence was suppressed owing to undue process.



Tania Bruguera, *Homenaje a Ana Mendieta (Tribute to Ana Mendieta)*, 1986-96, re-creation of Ana Mendieta's artworks and unrealised projects, lectures, exhibitions, interviews and texts. Installation view, 'Ana Mendieta / Tania Bruguera', Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales, Havana, 1992. Photograph: Gonzalo Vidal Alvarado. Courtesy Studio Bruguera

Memory, 1993-94]. In the early 1990s the government's cultural policy changed from allowing little critique to none whatsoever, so as artists we were forced to become more and more oblique and obscure. And then the government began putting a lot of pressure to incorporate the younger generation of artists into the market, as a legitimisation mechanism. Believe me, I tried to do drawings, but it wasn't for me. So I thought, how can I keep the energy of the previous generation, their criticality? An exhibition would not work because they were all gone, and neither would a panel discussion, so I said to myself, 'Okay, let's do a newspaper, because this is our news, the news in our life.' It was the first time that I worked collectively. But what happened then was that it was not only me being persecuted but also my collaborators, so I understood responsibility in a way that I never understood before. After this, I decided to start doing performances on my own so that I wouldn't get anyone in trouble. Later, I regretted having answered to political pressure in such a way, using my own body instead of pursuing the social body. Finding ways by which to confront power became then my focus.

WJTM: So would this be the performance *The Burden of Guilt* [*El peso de la culpa*, 1997], for example, in which you eat Cuban

soil mixed with water to recreate the gesture of indigenous Cubans, who were said to eat dirt until they died as a means to resist Spanish occupation?

TB: Yes, exactly. They were effective pieces, but my aversion to this period of my work came out of understanding how easily images could be manipulated by those in power to change their original intention. Soon I realised that going back to something so easily recognisable as performance was abandoning the research I was doing before, and to which I have since come back to: doing something that people don't think is art. So, for example, when I was doing *Memoria de la Postguerra*, people read it like a newspaper; it functioned as a newspaper for others but for me it was art.

WJTM: Then perhaps the 24-hour reading of Hannah Arendt [in 2015], which, like *The Burden of Guilt*, was performed in your house in Havana, could be seen as a kind of hybrid. It's not really a solo symbolic performance. It's perhaps subversive, but was it private – or did you open your doors to the public during the reading? And did the police come in right away then?

TB: The police showed up at the end of the reading. But they intervened throughout in

MEMORIA DE LA POSTGUERRA



NI TODO, NI TODOS; LA VOZ

"Dar con la verdad absoluta -si existe tal cosa- no resuelve nada, lo importante aquí es decidir nuestro punto de vista, descubrir dónde uno está parado, saber relacionar las cosas a nuestro alrededor en el mundo y desde ahí con todos los hierros imponer nuestra realidad"

Edmundo Desnoes

MEMORIA -de la postguerra- asume un espacio, y agradece la bondad del cubano, gracias a la cual puede ver la luz, a quien está dedicado.

Postguerra, por similitud a nivel físico de la ciudad, por el interior de la gente, por lo social del arte.

Una obra es una vía de conocimiento y comunicación, y el artista "el medium" que selecciona el tema y los recursos autonómicos más efectivos.

Allende las inconmensurables utopías, en el plano real, de la efectividad del arte, sólo existe CULTURA con la conciencia analítica y dolorosamente preocupada; con el diálogo sustancialista; con la tolerancia respetuosa pero segura; con la necesidad juiciosa de autoreconocimiento dentro de una identidad; con la capacidad de recordar y volver a situar.

No sé hasta qué punto, ni con qué vistas las filas vuelven a reestructurarse; un nuevo ejército avanza, junto a los sobrevivientes, con las lecciones de historia dadas, agotados y despiertos en otros compartimentos, todos jóvenes violentamente viejos. Y la latente necesidad, en espera, vestida de novia nuevamente a las puertas de la legitimidad sin dejarse de apuros trascendentalistas. ¿Cómo llegar sin protección, con la inconciencia del individualismo? Muchas maneras hay de saber la valía de un combatiente, nuestro ejército ha sido laureado siempre y cuando se une en propicio entorno, además de constar con la admiración y los ojos vistas de los demás.

¿Volveremos a esperar otra década para la fragua? ¿Volveremos a quedarnos mutilados y conformes por el camino? ¿Volveremos a esperar creernos el ombligo del mundo en el momento inexacto? ¿Tendremos suficientes reservas de tiempo? Son los 15 minutos que nos han vuelto a tocar.

Ciudad de La Habana, CUBA
Noviembre 1993



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Tania Bruguera,
*Memoria de la
Postguerra I (Postwar
Memory I)*, 1993,
newspaper made in
collaboration with
Cuban artists living
inside and outside
Cuba, 34 × 21.5cm.
Courtesy Studio
Bruguera

the sense that they started pulling the jackhammer on the street...

WJTM: To drown you out. I think Hannah Arendt would be so happy. They have to drown out your voice with a jackhammer! Her words are so powerful they need a jackhammer to counter them. In *Twilight of the Idols* [1889], Nietzsche promised to ‘philosophise with a hammer’. Perhaps the police were being compelled to collaborate with you, the public and Hannah Arendt.

TB: Yes, that’s one thing I really enjoyed, in spite of everything. All my research has been about power. First I looked at power and tried to understand what it was, then I wanted to take the tools of power and use them within my own field, next I tried to acquire power by moving into its own terrain, and now the power is performing for me, with my own tools – that is, symbolic tools, like the jackhammer! It seemed like a completion of the circle, having the government performing in response to my art.

WJTM: My friend and neighbour, activist Bill Ayers, says that Martin Luther King, Jr. was a great performance artist because he managed to make Bull Connor and the police department of Birmingham, Alabama into ‘extras’ in his demonstrations. They became part of the performance, with their fire hoses and their dogs, and of course they performed for television cameras, which made a huge difference because it turned the tide in the civil rights movement.

TB: Absolutely. It’s fantastic to make the government perform for your cause. It’s also ironic that I have been trying to have a dialogue with them for so long in their own terms, using their own language, and now they reverse it by using my language, which is performative gestures.

WJTM: Give me an example of what you mean by ‘their own language’?

TB: I mean the idea of doing a newspaper and then a school – areas that in Cuba are reserved for the government, the state and the powers that be.

WJTM: In other words, to make institutions rather than artworks as objects.

TB: Yes, at some point I got fed up with critical art because I felt it wasn’t going

anywhere. The government wasn’t really listening, it wasn’t changing anything. So I decided to be a bit more direct: to create alternative institutions and make them function the way I would like the real ones to function. Someone has now called this ‘positive institutional critique’, but the point is that it is very hard to do institutional critique in Cuba because you don’t have access to any data, and anything institutional belongs to the government, therefore enquiring can be portrayed as a threat to national security. In Cuba there is often the feeling that any desired change is impossible, so I wanted to demonstrate that it is actually possible – I wanted to go from asking to doing. I was trying to create alternative institutions because institutions are the body of power.

‘Artivism’ is about creating a situation where you are an artist-citizen and a citizen-artist rather than an artist and a citizen.

WJTM: I wanted to ask you about the *Tatlin’s Whisper* [*El susurro de Tatlin*] series, which you staged in 2008 at the Tate Modern in London, in the Havana Biennial in 2009, and which you attempted to perform again in a public square in Havana in 2014 before you were detained. Why do you call it *Tatlin’s Whisper*?

TB: Well, as you know, my work is really influenced by the art of the turn of the twentieth century – Soviet Constructivism but also Bauhaus and Dada – and how the Soviet revolution wanted to put art in the service of the people... And the whisper, well, Tatlin was living in a time when ideologies were strong and people were very enthusiastic about re-thinking how to live together and what was social justice. When I made this piece – before Occupy Wall Street or Tahrir Square – the Left was very weak and not very creative.

WJTM: So the whisper was in contrast to the revolutionary shout. The Tatlins and the Futurists and the Constructivists were shouting from the rooftops, creating monuments to possible futures.

TB: Yes. Each *Tatlin’s Whisper* starts with an image on TV, and so the work is also

about how we are anaesthetised by the non-responsibility of action. I wanted to bring whatever is on TV into your life, so, for example, the idea of seeing mounted police using crowd control and corralling people to control them is not something that you would normally experience, you would just see it on TV. This is a phenomenon that is happening everywhere. But by acquiring that knowledge through personal experience it is harder to remain indifferent to the experience of others. It also prepares you for a potential moment when you are in such a situation. Similarly, in Cuba you always saw Fidel Castro talking on TV, but you had never had the opportunity to talk to a mass of people yourself, or be a leader. With *Tatlin's Whisper*, you had a chance to see what it felt like.

WJTM: And as I recall your instructions for the police at the Tate were that they could only do it once or twice, they couldn't repeat the performance because you didn't want them to think of it as being part of an artwork. These are not actors playing cops, or cops pretending to be actors. These are cops doing exactly what they do, which is, again, the art-life encounter.

TB: Exactly. There was a young woman at the Tate who didn't want to follow the orders, and then one of the cops started making this violent movement with the horse, and I thought, an actor would never do that! This is something I do a lot in my projects – invite people from one field to perform their everyday roles in another context. It was the same when I invited Bernardine [Dohrn] and Bill [Ayers] to do a performance with me during an event organised by Our Literal Speed in 2008.³ I knew there was going to be a full room of art historians and I wanted to bring politics into the conversation on art while at the same time thinking when is something art.

WJTM: Many of your works have been provocative, but could there be a distinction between this work that you did at Our Literal Speed and works that are meant to be provocative towards the state – to get the state to react?

TB: But the art historians are also the power.

WJTM: Well, I think they have a different kind of power. They are nothing like the state. Let's face it, art historians do not run the world!

TB: No, of course, you are not an artist, you don't know how it feels to be an artist.

WJTM: I am an art historian, but don't forget that we're just poor innocent saps who don't know what we're doing. So what's the difference between provoking the state and provoking the art community? Because it strikes me that when you are provoking the state you want to create a situation that will change people's perceptions. With the art historians or the art world and fellow artists, when you create a provocation it's more of an experiment.

TB: I have sometimes been accused of doing social experiments with people. I used to get very mad but more recently I have started to think that maybe it is not such a bad thing after all. We are already in this set-up – the art gallery or the museum – which is a very protected place, while the state constantly does experiments on people... It is actually there where you have to suspend disbelief. There are indeed differences when the work targets the government or the state and when it targets art historians, whom I also target a lot – the Arte Útil archive is all about art history, for example.

WJTM: Would you let me play devil's advocate about Arte Útil and your idea of 'useful art'? Isn't maybe the oldest idea about art that it should be useless?

TB: Well, it's not so old. The whole thing with Arte Útil and the idea of putting Duchamp's urinal back in the bathroom, as we have now done in the Queens Museum in New York and in the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, is precisely to go against uselessness as art's ontology. But I have never been interested in negating other forms of artistic practice. I'm interested in engaging in a conversation about the role of art in society today. What is art for, at a time when the art market has such an influence in defining what art is? With Arte Útil I did want to defend the right

Opening session of the foundation process of INSTAR – Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt, 20-24 May 2015, uninterrupted collective reading and discussion of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Cubans and foreign visitors, one dove, one armchair, the book, two loudspeakers (one inside and one outside), recordings of the lectures and discussion to be sent via email from outside the country, cultural officers, Cuban State security agents, 'Respuesta Rápida' Movement, Repudiation Act. Courtesy INSTAR and Yo También Exijo Platform

3 Tania Bruguera, *I do not want to see that at my Breakfast Table*, a performance featuring Bill Ayers and Bernardine Dohrn, Our Literal Speed symposium, 1 March 2008, ZKM Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe.



that we have as artists to be committed to political and social issues, and also to try to use art as a way of challenging how society is organised. I saw this in the 1980s in Cuba. So for me it's going back to this idea of loss. I want to go back to that moment – and this also happened with the Constructivists – when artists really had an impact in the world. When I see artists challenging the status quo and proposing other ways of being together, for me that is also an aesthetic experience. This is what I call 'est-ética', an aesthetics of ethics. When you see a project that shifts the way you think things are socially or politically determined, the aesthetic experience is right there.

WJTM: I wanted to ask you about your term 'arte de conducta', which I understand that you are now renaming 'artivism', is that right?

TB: Yes, but they are two different things. 'Arte de conducta' is a working methodology in which the reaction of the people – their behaviour – informs the content of the work. A perfect example of this is *#YoTambiénExijo*, where I tried to do *Tatlin's Whisper #6* in the Plaza de la Revolución in Havana in 2014, because people were judging the piece through the public's reaction. Whether one supported it or not, the conversation was about the reaction it elicited from the government.⁴ In this instance, the art piece becomes just a stage, a situation that you create so that people react, even if the reaction is *not* reacting. In fact, it is just an evolution of what performance art is. If you are doing a performance and somebody coughs or stands up and intervenes in the performance, that becomes part of the narrative, and as the performer you have to be open to those accidents. With 'arte de

⁴ For a detailed account of the events following Bruguera's proposal, see Coco Fusco, 'The State of Detention: Performance, Politics, and the Cuban Public', *e-flux journal*, 3 January 2015, available at <http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/on-the-detention-of-cuban-artist-tania-bruguera-by-coco-fusco/> (last accessed on 13 July 2015).



conducta', I push that a little by partially removing my authorship: I only stage a situation and let people be the actors. This is why people say it is an experiment. But the point is not experimenting on people, it's more about activating a process of self-awareness for each of the participants, or letting them experiment with different reactions to a potential situation – and maybe next time, when it happens in real life, they will have a better understanding of themselves and how they would like to respond to that situation. 'Artivism' is about creating a situation where you are an artist-citizen and a citizen-artist rather than an artist and a citizen: you are using what you know about art to do activism and to be part of a social movement. I was actually very inspired by Occupy Wall Street, because I was there just like anybody else, and the artistic stuff we were doing was naturally incorporated into the rest of the things happening there. Then these artists came and said 'we're going to do the "Occupy Biennale", the biennale of occupy'...

WJTM: That was very disturbing to me as well. I went to the memorial of the Occupy Movement at Kunst-Werke [Institute of Contemporary Art] in Berlin [in 2012],⁵ and they had all these relics of Occupy in the museum, like memento mori. A bit like Mark Wallinger's 'State Britain' [2007] at Tate Britain, which memorialised the relics of Brian Haw's ten-year solo occupation of

Parliament Square in London. I don't want it forgotten, but it's strange to have it embalmed this way.

TB: Fetishisation is seriously damaging art.

WJTM: So 'arte de conducta' is about a process in the audience, but 'artivism'... I don't think I am clear about what the difference is. Can you put it in simple terms for me, please?

TB: With 'arte de conducta', you are yourself the target, whereas 'artivism' targets the things you want to change politically or socially, it is about a different sustainability. 'Arte de conducta' is a practice that aims to transform the audience into active citizens; the idea is that audience members will know themselves better, and that will probably – hopefully – make them better citizens. 'Artivism' is actually about having those people who are already conscious of their power as citizens engage in an action that is directed to change policy. I never thought about this before, but maybe 'arte de conducta' could be the first step to engage people in 'artivism'.

WJTM: I have just come back from Palestine, and I remember vividly when you went there and I said, 'Tania, I'll introduce you to all my friends. They will take care of you and look after you.' And

5 7th Berlin Biennale, 27 April–1 July 2012, curated by Artur Żmijewski.

Tania Bruguera in collaboration with the online platform Yo También Exijo, #YoTambienExijo, 2014-15, online campaign, letter, announcement, Facebook page, Twitter account, political demands, press clippings, meetings with cultural officials, permit requests, interrogation sessions with counter-intelligence officials, jail, legal charges, law proposal. Courtesy Studio Bruguera and Yo También Exijo Platform

you said, 'No, Tom, I don't want that. I have to experience it for myself.'

TB: Yes, that was my first time there and I really wanted to experience it without either side's propaganda. I have a series of works, which is titled after the place and the year of the work, and which reflects on how the political imaginary of a place is formed. So far I have made works about Havana, Kassel, Moscow and Bogotá, and I wanted to finalise the series with a piece about Israel and Palestine. I wanted the trip to follow my ignorance, to understand how the political image of Palestine and Israel has been constructed.

WJTM: I remember you saying that when people would find out you were Cuban, they would say, 'Oh comrade, welcome comrade!' You know that in the late 1970s and early 80s there was an attempt to make an international front in solidarity with Palestine, and Latin America was central to it. A lot of artists sent artwork to the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organisation] headquarters in Beirut then, to form the first National Museum of Palestine in exile.⁶

TB: When was that?

WJTM: 1978.

TB: I was probably there.

WJTM: You were?

TB: Yes, probably, because my father was the ambassador to Lebanon. I will have to ask my mother because I always get confused with the years.

WJTM: It is very interesting, this moment when Palestine tried to assert itself as an international presence by having artists recognise it from all over the world. The only country that did not send any works was the US...

TB: For my art project, I am proposing the dissolution of the state of Israel.

WJTM: Well, then you should join BDS

[the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement] because according to Thomas Friedman in today's *New York Times*, that's the goal of BDS – the destruction of the state of Israel.⁷

TB: I don't say destruction, I say dissolution. The state itself must decide that it has to disappear. This is my project.

WJTM: So here is a question that goes back to your roots. You were raised in a communist society with the ideology of Marxist-Leninism as part of everyday life. Your father was part of the revolutionary generation – I have a picture of him on my refrigerator standing next to Che Guevara. And, though you are consistently critical of the betrayed utopia of the Cuban Revolution, it doesn't seem to have turned you towards the Yanqui capitalist alternative at all. So I wonder if this may be connected to what you said about your art being about loss. Could it be that one of the political losses is the loss of that utopia, the promise that your father lived for, which made you still want to be a revolutionary?

TB: Yes, you are totally right. I think I still do art about loss, and my open letter to Raúl Castro [from 2014] was to a great extent about the loss of the Revolution, the fact that we are losing the values of the Revolution, but this actually started when the Revolution became a trademark. The word 'revolutionary' has been co-opted as a brand by the people in power in Cuba, so when I say 'I'm a revolutionary' in the interrogation sessions, they get mad at me because they think they are the only ones who can use that term. And all this corruption that we start seeing right now – that's not a revolution! So my project to create an Institute of Artivism in Cuba has to do with the desire to prepare people for what is coming (which seems to be state capitalism); to say, 'If you don't know your rights now you will be as exploited as before, if not more!' The question of timing is important in my work. 2016 is the quincentenary of Thomas More's *Utopia*, and this is one of the reasons I am so adamant to have the Institute's inaugural event this year, because the Institute is also an homage to the right to enact utopias.

6 This is the focus of 'Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts from the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, 1978', Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), 20 February–1 June 2015, curated by Rasha Salti and Kristine Khouri. The exhibition subsequently toured to Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), Berlin, 19 March–9 May 2016.

7 See Thomas Friedman, 'Netanyahu, Prime Minister of the State of Israel-Palestine', *The New York Times*, 25 May 2016, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/25/opinion/netanyahu-prime-minister-of-the-state-of-israel-palestine.html> (last accessed on 25 July 2016).

The Office of Useful Art



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Social Autonomy and the Use Value of Art

– John Byrne

In 1917, Marcel Duchamp placed a urinal on a pedestal, signed it R. Mutt and declared it art. In 2010, Cuban artist Tania Bruguera took an identical urinal, signed it R. Mutt, reconnected it to the plumbing system in the Queens Museum of Art's men's room, and called it Arte Útil.¹

The Asociación de Arte Útil (AAU) is the home of an ongoing and propositional art project instigated by Tania Bruguera. The overall intention of the Asociación is to produce an international online and offline resource, or toolkit, that brings together

Arte Útil projects should:

- 1. Propose new uses for art within society*
- 2. Challenge the field within which it operates (civic, legislative, pedagogical, scientific, economic, etc.)*
- 3. Be 'timing specific', responding to current urgencies*
- 4. Be implemented and function in real situations*
- 5. Replace authors with initiators and spectators with users*
- 6. Have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users*
- 7. Pursue sustainability whilst adapting to changing conditions*
- 8. Re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation³*

John Byrne analyses the Asociación de Arte Útil's agenda of 'useful art' and the role of the artist in neoliberalism.

and propagates forms of art practice that seek to have direct and lasting social, political and economic impact. Begun in 2013, at the Arte Útil Lab at the Queens Museum of Art in New York, the project has consisted of a series of public programmes, workshops, symposia and events at a number of art museums and institutions; an online platform with a selected archive-cum-database of useful art projects and other Arte Útil-related materials; several exhibition-presentations of the project and its archive; and most recently, an Office of Useful Art, due to be opened by the Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust in Liverpool in late 2016.²

Underpinning the AAU is a collaboratively developed set of criteria for the production, distribution and propagation of Arte Útil:

These are also the criteria by which any application for inclusion in the AAU online resource/archive is considered.⁴ At the time of writing, there are over four hundred entries, including work as familiar as Bauhaus and as diverse as Theaster Gates's *Dorchester Projects* (2009), an artist-led regeneration of housing in Chicago; Darren O'Donnell's *Haircuts by Children* (2006–07); Ruben Santiago's *Turning a public toilet into a spa* (2007); and the AHT Group/Sun Development PTY project 'Violence prevention through urban upgrading (VPUU)' (2006–ongoing), a holistic attempt to improve living conditions and reduce violence in the township of Khayelitsha, in Cape Town, South Africa. The archive also includes projects by Bruguera herself, such as Immigrant Movement International, founded in 2010, conceived as a community space hosted by the Queens Museum and encompassing a

1 Press release for 'Arte Útil Lab: Investigating the Parameters of Useful Art', Queens Museum of Art, New York, 17 February–2 June 2013, available at http://artforum.com/uploads/guide.002/id07566/press_release.pdf (last accessed on 18 August 2016).

2 It is also worth mentioning that AAU has developed within a broader constellation of interconnected projects, including the Autonomy Project (2010–11) and the five-year programme 'Uses of Art - The Legacy of 1848 and 1989' (2013–17) by the confederation of art museums L'Internationale. See <http://theautonomyproject.org/> and <http://www.internationaleonline.org/programmes/list> (both last accessed on 18 August 2016).

3 These criteria came about as a result of discussions at the Queens Museum, Grizedale Arts, Cumbria and the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven in the run up to the exhibition 'Museum of Arte Útil' at the Van Abbemuseum from 7 December 2013 to 30 March 2014. See <http://museumarteventil.net> and <http://www.arteventil.org/about/colophon/> (both last accessed on 18 August 2016).

4 The AAU archive is currently run by Broadcasting the Archive, an independent project conceived by Gemma Medina Estupiñán and Alessandra Saviotti, which aims to 'reactivate and mediate the Arte Útil's archive within and beyond the museum's context'. See <http://broadcastingthearchive.tumblr.com> (last accessed on 18 August 2016).



diverse range of activities, from public programming, residencies and workshops to language lessons and free legal services, with the ultimate goal of developing ‘an international think tank that recognises (im)migrants’ role in the advancement of society at large’.⁵

The AAU – the projects that constitute it and its call for an international movement of oppositional artistic strategies – immediately conjures up a familiar landscape of ethical and aesthetic dilemmas. In an art world where artworks are being replaced by experiences, passive audiences are giving way to active ‘users’ and museums are repurposing themselves as producers of new civic identities, AAU might simply seem to

offer one more stark alternative to the established neo-Kantian logics of aesthetic autonomy and disinterested contemplation. Moreover, at first glance it might seem that Arte Útil is barely distinguishable from existing modes of socially engaged art practice, such as Jonas Staal’s New World Summit or Ahmet Ögüt’s Silent University, to give just two recent examples (both also feature in the AAU archive), but I would argue that the AAU represents something more ambitious and far-reaching than the individual projects and practices that fall within its remit. The AAU is nothing less than a radical reorganisation of our relationship to art, artists, museums, galleries and their attendant ‘art worlds’ as we commonly

Urinal at the Queens Museum of Art, New York, as part of the Arte Útil project (2013-ongoing). Courtesy Studio Bruguera

5 See <http://www.queensmuseum.org/immigrant-movement-international> (last accessed on 18 August 2016).

know them – or knew them – to be.

To this end, the AAU demands an alternative set of descriptive and evaluative terms. For the Museum of Arte Útil, at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven in 2013, theorist Stephen Wright was commissioned to produce a 'Lexicon of Usership', in an attempt to develop terminology more suited to evaluating forms of complex co-production and usership, extending well beyond the borders of our current 'museological' understanding of art.⁶ The AAU archive is divided into sections such as 'urban development', 'scientific', 'economy' and 'environment', and the entries for specific projects (which can be downloaded as printable pdfs) are categorised in terms of their 'initiators', 'goals', 'users' and 'beneficial outcomes'. In Wright's compendium, the question is posed, wouldn't it be better to simply retire terms like 'authorship', 'objecthood' and 'autonomy'?⁷

In fact, I would suggest that Arte Útil raises two key and interrelated issues about the changing nature and status of aesthetic autonomy, and that, furthermore, these two issues may uncover an internal and inherited contradiction within contemporary art practice – an as-yet-unresolved contradiction that begins to point beyond the historical impasse of autonomy versus social engagement. If this is the case, then projects such as Arte Útil, and the whole notion of 'useful art', carry with them the means and the necessity to rethink and repurpose the term 'autonomy' in order to reactivate the very possibility of a radical alternative.



The first and most familiar of the two key issues that are raised by Arte Útil concerns the material (or increasingly immaterial) status of the work of art itself. If art is to resist the status quo, then surely it must provide us with something to resist it with or by? Whether this 'artwork' be a recalcitrant object, a gesture, a process or something else is not at stake here; rather, what is at stake is the cultural investment in the recognisable manifestation of that thing we call 'art'. This concern is historically underpinned by discourses surrounding the

relation of aesthetic autonomy to the process of making and craft as possible alternatives to the industrialised and commercialised commodification of mass-produced culture that developed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. More often than not, these positions developed nostalgic notions of the autonomy of art and valorised handmade artefacts or artworks against items produced through divided, alienated labour and the reification of commodity culture.

The second and more recent of the key issues raised by this notion of useful art concerns *work* – the kind of labour that the work of art has now become (or is becoming). This perhaps more pressing issue has its theoretical underpinnings in the Italian autonomism and draws upon a set of concerns regarding the ideological coercion, and subsequent instrumentalisation, of traditionally oppositional discourses within an increasingly globalised neoliberal economy. As the artist Liam Gillick has succinctly put it:

*The accusation ... is that artists are at best the ultimate freelance knowledge workers and at worst barely capable of distinguishing themselves from the consuming desire to work at all times, neurotic people who deploy a series of practices that coincide quite neatly with the requirements of neoliberal, predatory, continually mutating capitalism of the every moment. Artists are people who behave, communicate and innovate in the same manner as those who spend their days trying to capitalise every moment and exchange of daily life. They offer no alternative.*⁸

If Gillick is right, then we now find ourselves at an increasingly difficult and complex cultural impasse. On the one hand, it becomes increasingly impossible to resist the status quo through any kind of recognisable artistic gesture – material or otherwise – without falling into the trap of a commodified and commercialised art industry. On the other, it is similarly impossible to step outside the framework of the art industry – as a recognisable form of radical gesture or resistance – when any attempt to do so runs the risk of direct complicity with the

6 See Steven Wright, *Towards a Lexicon of Usership*, Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2013, available at <http://www.art-util.org/tools/lexicon/> (last accessed on 18 August 2016).

7 As alternatives Wright suggests 'emerging concepts' such as 'Cognitive Surplus', 'Double-Ontology', 'Museum 3.0', 'Narratorship' and 'Repurposing', and new 'Modes of Usership' such as 'Gleaning', 'Hacking', 'Piggybacking' and 'Poaching'. See *ibid.*

8 Liam Gillick, 'The Good of Work', *e-flux journal*, issue 16, May 2010, available at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-good-of-work/> (last accessed on 18 August 2016).

deregulatory logic of capital. What was once seen to be the pursuit of an alternative artistic lifestyle, the refusal to ‘fit in’ or to follow the patterns and rhythms of a contracted nine-to-five job, is now the new standard of precarious labour. Any symbolic value in this form of alterity has already been commodified and re-consumed as neoliberal forms of autonomous ‘self-management’.

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Another way of trying to think through this conundrum, and also of attempting to avoid any collapse into the familiar binary of aesthetics versus politics (however interconnected, intertwined or emplotted they may be), is to re-examine the historical emergence of the idea of useful art itself. The AAU points out that ‘Arte Útil in Spanish roughly translates as useful art, but also suggests art as a device or tool’.⁹ The term’s manifold meaning can be difficult to translate into English, where the very idea of useful art often appears as either an oxymoron or an irrelevance – where art’s ‘use’ is merely a function or addendum of its value as art. (An attitude captured, for instance, in Oscar Wilde’s 1891 novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by the phrase ‘All art is quite useless.’¹⁰)

In 1969, Argentinean-born artist Eduardo Costa began a series of artistic interventions titled *Useful Art Works* that were intended to bring modest improvements to daily life in New York. These works – which included, for example, the simple act of buying and replacing missing metal street signs, or, more ambitiously, repainting a subway station on the Flushing Line (a proposal Costa was prevented from completing) – were intended as an attack on the assumption that art and utility were two separate and incompatible spheres. Also in 1969, Mierle Laderman Ukeles – another key figure for Arte Útil – produced her ‘Manifesto for Maintenance Art’, centred on the invisible and gendered labour that underpins the functioning of culture and its institutions.¹¹ A washing performance by

Ukeles was the closing event for Bruguera’s initial Arte Útil Lab at the Queens Museum, conducted with the participation of the institution’s director and its maintenance supervisor.¹² Through her subsequent research, Bruguera discovered that the Italian artist Pino Poggi had previously referred to ‘Arte Utile’; the intention of which, according to Poggi’s 1965 manifesto, is to ‘help give the average man a clear grasp of his real problems in life [...] AU is not limited solely to the precincts of the universities and academies, where the same, small clique of intellectuals constantly embalms the whole with their verbiage’; instead, ‘AU will only exist of the people and for the people in public places, in shopping centres and as street theatre’.¹³

Arte Útil and its 1960s precursors are also embedded, I would contend, within a longer and often overlooked lineage of artistic resistance. To ask when and why the juxtaposition of ‘use’ and ‘art’ became problematic is to return to a period before

***What if we simply accept
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deregulated nightmare?***

the neo-Kantian architecture of artistic production, distribution and reception, when aesthetics, politics, autonomy and the uses of art all played a role in the production of a new sense of the civic in Europe. In that period, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the idea of useful art had a decisive role in imagining social alternatives to the economic and cultural impact of the Industrial Revolution.

The growing difficulty in reconciling use or use value with the alienation of mechanised mass production during this period is perhaps most clearly expressed in the writings of Karl Marx, specifically in his attempt to distinguish between use value

9 See the ‘about’ page of the Museum of Arte Útil website: <http://museumarteutil.net/about/> (last accessed on 18 August 2016).

10 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, London: Penguin Books, 1985, p.4.

11 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, ‘MANIFESTO FOR MAINTENANCE ART 1969! Proposal for an exhibition “CARE”’, available at http://www.feldmangallery.com/media/pdfs/Ukeles_MANIFESTO.pdf (last accessed on 18 August 2016).

12 The performance is documented at <https://vimeo.com/69101898> (last accessed on 18 August 2016).

13 Pino Poggi, ‘Manifest Arte Utile I’ (1965), available at <http://www.arte-utile.net/PinoPoggi/web-content/navigation/f-au.html> (last accessed on 18 August 2016).

14 See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1* (1867, trans. Ben Fowkes), London: Penguin, 1990, pp.131–38.



Publicity image for the project Immigrant Movement International, Queens, New York (2010-15). Courtesy the artist and Studio Bruguera

and exchange value.¹⁴ As Fredric Jameson has recently reminded us, underpinning this distinction is an inherited moral and ethical imperative. Use value, for Marx, was both qualitative and bodily, a metaphysical imperative regarding the necessity of material and social production.¹⁵ Exchange value, on the other hand, tended to be equated with the quantitative, as a more abstract function of the mind and soul. This analytical attempt to separate the bodily, material and qualitative from the mental, abstract and quantitative is also familiar from the famous ‘base and superstructure’ metaphor that Marx employed in his ‘Preface to A Critique of Political Economy’ (1859). Here, a real, material and economic base (which Marx suggested could be analysed with the accuracy of science) is seen as the true driving force of history, producing the ideological superstructure of law, politics, ethics and culture.

As we know, the historical consequences of this bifurcation for the role of art in the West have been profound. At one extreme, art and culture came to be seen as little more than a functional reflection of the true economic driving forces of history (with the concomitant assumption that a reading or analysis of culture could provide a key to understanding these material driving

forces). At the other extreme, an emerging mentality of art for art’s sake saw political and ethical value in this separation, arguing that art and culture should be isolated from the material necessities of everyday life and held within an autonomous, aesthetic field. The political argument for this position was that art and culture had to be protected from the corrupting forces of industrialised capital if they were to remain a viable vehicle through which to imagine any kind of alternative utopian future. This latter position, propagated by Alfred H. Barr, Jr’s development of a white-cube museum space (as the most appropriate arena to experience autonomous works of art) and an accompanying historical narrative of isms (underpinned by a commitment to the pursuit of technical radicalism as a viable artistic end in itself) is still largely with us today.

However, in opposition to both of these polarities (art as a mere function of its socio-economic determinants or art as a separate, emancipatory and autonomous field) a more discernibly left-wing lineage emerged, arguing for the value of art and culture as the physical embodiment of non-alienated labour, and for art and craft to be used as a means of protecting the moral and ethical ownership of work and labour against the instrumentalising and brutalis-

15 See Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume 1*, London: Verso, 2014.

ing forces of mass production. This tradition, which emphasises craft, design and making – and extends from John Ruskin and William Morris to Constructivism, Bauhaus and beyond – also provides, I would argue, the conceptual framework within which the two seemingly irreconcilable positions of autonomy and heteronomy have traditionally met: the qualitative and ethical bodily function of the work or labour of art that, in turn, underpins the valorisation of authentic labour in art. By insisting on the dialectical codependency of autonomy and heteronomy, and – whether tacitly or explicitly – on the use value of art as its distinguishing trait, this lineage encompasses both the scale and ambition of AAU today.



Despite recent attempts to think through the complex relationships of autonomy and heteronomy, there remains a tendency to posit any understanding of art's social and political functions in terms of its ability to bridge the gap between art and life.¹⁶ As a result, the flexible and productive relationship involving autonomy, heteronomy and use value remains a fixed one between

Is it not also in the interests of power to maintain and sustain the existing category of the artist?

irreconcilable though mutually dependent regimes. Put another way: artists might work with communities to produce all manner of ephemeral, temporal and ongoing projects, but it is still expected that we experience the legacy or residue of the activity itself as art, or at least as art as we know it, within and through the existing framework of art world reception (museums, galleries, biennials, websites, books, journals, etc.).

The 2013 exhibition of the Museum of Arte Útil at the Van Abbemuseum was, in part, an attempt to shift some of these received ideas. Visitors were given the choice

of either paying a standard entrance fee or gaining free entry by agreeing to be an active 'user' of the show. The Van Abbemuseum itself was proposed as a 'social power plant' – a site of interchange and co-production, where history and art could be collaboratively reused as a means to imagine new forms of civic citizenship. The show's centre was a physical presentation of the Arte Útil online archive; surrounding rooms were organised according to a series of thematics, mixing artworks, documentation and makeshift structures and carrying instructions for the visitor-user on 'what to use and how to use it'.¹⁷ Perhaps inevitably, the exhibition also highlighted its own physical and ideological limitations: when the spaces were activated – through discussions, meetings, presentations, workshops or performances – the potentialities of Arte Útil became accessible and usable; when they were not, the current templates we have for experiencing artworks in galleries and museum spaces – as objectifications of invested artistic labour, whose latent surplus value is waiting to be extracted via the aesthetic experience of spectatorship – began to contradict the manifest intentions of both the AAU and the long-term projects whose legacies were on display.

But there is also another, and perhaps more radical, way of thinking through this conundrum that, I would argue, the project of Arte Útil can help provide. What if we simply accept that the avant-garde dream of uniting art and life has finally come true, as deregulated nightmare? What if we also accept that there is no longer a discernable split between material base and ideological superstructure? And what if we can finally agree that art and life have already merged, not as the emancipatory and dialectical resolution of a historical struggle, but as the neoliberal elision of work and leisure through the aestheticisation of labour? If this is the case, then art, as it now exists, provides little more than a commodified cypher of delusional radicality, a semiotised mechanism which now functions, rather like Jean Baudrillard's Disneyland, as a last ideological lie – a mythological guarantee that there still somehow exists a reality beyond art, a discernable material and

16 For instance, Jacques Rancière posits a metapolitics of aesthetics as a means to illuminate the full complexity and interconnectedness of aesthetic and political debate within the Western canon. See J. Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (trans. Gabriel Rockhill), London: Continuum, 2004. See also Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), which is more orientated towards objectified forms of resistance as art in gallery spaces.

17 See <http://museumarteventil.net/about/> (last accessed on 18 August 2016).



Installation view, 'The Museum of Arte Útil', archive room, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2013-14. Photograph: Peter Cox. Courtesy Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven

economic base that art can still be an effective and productive part of. This admittedly bleak scenario would suggest that we have reached a point of cultural saturation, an overlap and integration of previously identifiable political positions, in which left and right ideologies have blended and blurred – a successful occupation of art by life and life by art.

However unpalatable these observations may be, or however discordantly they may jar with our cherished notions of art's ameliorative and reparatory capacity, they would also seem to be the only possible solution for remapping a territory of effective artistic activism under current conditions. And this activist-pragmatist approach, as Bruguera herself outlined at the most recent AAU Summit,¹⁸ should operate at multiple political levels. To be able to talk to institutions of power, let alone to harbour the ambition of changing their systems of operation, the AAU must also be capable of operating at an institutional level. It is not enough to simply point towards a set of seemingly useful purposes that social art projects can engage themselves with – which, for Bruguera, would be to infantilise the concept of Arte Útil. The focus must be on changing existing power structures rather than merely illustrating their current shortcomings through the tried and tested vehicles of art practice. In this way, Bruguera's alignment of the AAU with the

mechanisms of various international institutions can be seen as a deliberate and pragmatic attempt to change the way such institutions operate – a kind of activist approach at an institutional level. This process also goes hand in hand with the expansion of an international AAU network that, to some extent, has already begun to grow and govern itself autonomously as a self-regulated user-based resource.

No doubt as a result of these factors, Bruguera displays an ambivalent, and sometimes contradictory, relationship to her own role as artist and/or instigator, on the one hand questioning the use and purpose of the authorial role of the artist within the museum or gallery setting, and on the other openly adopting the 'artist' role as and when it is a useful tool for addressing power. In her own conflictual and well-publicised relationship with the Cuban government, Bruguera's right to be seen as an artist (as well as her official validation as an artist through her participation in major exhibitions, biennales, etc.) provides both a public platform and legal mandate for her voice as well as others' to be publicly heard.

Yet such fluid and contradictory forms of pragmatism may well begin to run counter to the overall concerns of the AAU project. To really provide new models of practice as meaningful alternatives to the current political status quo, the AAU needs to develop a rigorous theory of how it can begin

18 'Arte Útil Summit 2016', Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, 22-25 July 2016. See <http://www.arte-util.org/studies/arte-util-summit-2016/> (last accessed on 18 August 2016).



Granby Four Streets
regeneration
project, 1998-
ongoing, Liverpool.
Photograph: Gemma
Medina Estupiñán

to value the co-production and redistribution of real and existing social knowledge. This can only be achieved through the development of a truly peer-to-peer online and offline network of collaborating associates, affiliates and active constituents who are willing to test and redefine the legal, moral and ethical limits of reproducing and repurposing existing art-led projects to their own, and each other's, social ends and needs. Such a strategy would depend on a real, rather than symbolic, commitment to the development and co-production of strategies for artistic and social change. And if this is the case, then we may have to confront some of the difficulties in retaining or propagating the current role and function of the 'artist' in our neoliberal society, however useful artists may appear to be in confronting the existing legal systems of power. After all, is it not also in the interests of power to maintain and sustain the existing category of the artist?

In light of this, we might consider AAU's recently established collaboration with the residents of the Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust in Liverpool. The CLT itself evolved out of a twenty-year struggle by residents against attempts by local and national government to depopulate and demolish the local community and its infrastructure. At one point, around 2007, when only five houses on one street (Cairn Street) remained occupied, a group of female residents began to develop forms of everyday resistance and activism by moving their lives onto the street: planting flowers, sitting at tables, redecorating boarded-up buildings and, above all, developing a shared knowledge of housing and property law. The Granby Four Streets CLT, formed in 2011 as a not-for-profit community-interest company and emerging from a grass-roots activism, successfully lobbied and secured assets from the local authority, which they then began to regenerate. Granby Four Streets were recently brought to the attention of the UK media through their collaboration with the London-based architects' collective Assemble to renovate houses in the area with the participation of local residents, a project that won the 2015 Turner Prize.

Yet perhaps much more than Assemble – the de facto recipients of the Turner Prize, who were deemed the 'artists' in this

community-based collaboration – it is the example of Granby Four Streets that suggests a model of resistance to current frameworks of instrumentalising totality that does not, as a consequence, do the dirty work of neoliberalism in the name of art. Granby's newfound Office of Useful Art intends to develop ground-up, constituency-led uses of the Asociación's toolkit, providing valuable means to collectively rethink the role of art as socially produced knowledge. After successfully fighting local and national government policy for many years, the Granby residents are well aware of the dangers of instrumentalisation. For them, the AAU offers access to a growing network of resources and institutional links whilst, at the same time, inviting their contributions toward the growth of the Asociación which is keen to listen to and learn from their wealth of experience. Such active forms of reciprocity are, I would argue, capable of developing beyond the usual experience, in art, of exchange as symbolic gesture. Instead, they indicate the capacity for new forms of oppositional realpolitik, operating as a double ontological proposition – able to function as both, or either, a work of art and/or a radical social proposition for living otherwise.

In this scenario, terms like 'autonomy' once again become useful precisely because they are now, seemingly, so useless. To reject autonomy out of hand, to assume that it is a term that can somehow be jettisoned or retired, is to give too much ground away to a predatory neoliberal logic that is more than capable of rebranding activism for its own needs. Instead, autonomy must be reframed and repurposed as a site of social productivity; a collective struggle to re-complexify and reimagine 'art' as a practice of lived resistance. And the key to this, I would argue, lies in the subtle and self-conscious shift in the terms and conditions of art practice that projects like the AAU both represent and, more importantly, can effect – from a use of art that symbolically imagines alternative possible futures within an existing framework of production and consumption, to a use of art that enables diverse constituencies to reimagine what the work, or labour, of art could be today.

This essay is part of Afterall's forthcoming reader on art and autonomy, edited by Sven Lütticken, to be published in 2017.







Inji Efflatoun,
Mathbahat
Dinshaway (The
Dinshaway Massacre),
c. 1950s, ink on
paper, 63.5 × 49.3cm.
Courtesy Barjeel Art
Foundation, Sharjah

Previous spread:
Inji Efflatoun,
Filling the Jars of the
Nile, c.1950s, detail.
Courtesy Safar Khan
Gallery, Cairo

Public/Private: The Many Lives of ‘Rebel Painter’ Inji Efflatoun

— Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

Egypt, at the turn of the last century, was in the strange and unenviable position of being occupied and governed from abroad by two foreign (and competing) powers all at once. It was then still a nominal province of the Ottoman Empire. Napoleon had invaded Egypt in the summer of 1798, bringing with him one of the most impressive expeditions of scientists and scholars in history. After three years, he was distracted elsewhere, and his forces withdrew. The Ottomans dispatched Muhammad Ali, a prominent military commander, Albanian by birth, to reconquer the territory and instigate

tion lost control of the canal in 1956, it marked the official end of the British adventure in Egypt.

Against that historic backdrop, a young, renegade artist named Inji Efflatoun made an extraordinary ink-on-paper drawing, capturing the full arc of the British occupation in the stark cruelty of a single scene. The body of a hanged man is framed by a painted border, with three additional narratives of extreme physical violence depicted in the flattened space behind him. With this drawing, Efflatoun returned to one of the most shocking incidents of the occupation, the Dinshaway episode of 1906. On a lazy summer afternoon, a small contingent of British soldiers had gone on a hunting expedition to the village of Dinshaway, in the northern Delta region of Monufia. There, they set about shooting pigeons for sport. But pigeons are a serious business in Egypt. Fanciers in the cities raise them in flocks, which are trained to fly, competitively, in dramatic swoops across the skyline. For legions of subsistence farmers in rural and agricultural areas, pigeons are a culinary delicacy in good times, the stuff of survival in bad. The residents of Dinshaway reacted explosively to what they perceived as the soldiers’ attack on their livelihood. An Egyptian woman was accidentally shot and wounded. A grain silo caught fire. A fight broke out. One of the soldiers was thumped hard on the head. He suffered a concussion, followed by sunstroke, and then, to everyone’s horror, dropped dead. A farmer oblivious to the ruckus stopped to help the dying man. He was mistaken for the soldier’s murderer and beaten to death by the remaining troops.

The official, top-down British response was quick, brutal and woefully disproportionate. Evelyn Baring, known to all as Lord Cromer, was consul general, the highest British colonial authority in Egypt. Having entered the country to put down a local revolt against the Khedivate, he was especially keen on deterring acts of resistance, whether against Ottoman proxies or his own troops.

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie discusses how Inji Efflatoun’s tumultuous political and artistic life reflects the turns and twists of modern Egypt.

reforms, which he did. Instead of returning Egypt to the empire, however, Muhammad Ali established his own dynasty, which the Ottomans alternately accepted and tried to destroy. Although they set out to assassinate him many times, the Ottomans ultimately learned to tolerate his newly renamed Khedivate of Egypt.

British forces were less enthused by this style of sovereignty. When the Khedivate began to falter, in the late nineteenth century, they stepped in to occupy the country and restore order. The British were particularly concerned about the emergence of a local, proto-nationalist opposition. They supported Ottoman rule while pursuing their own interests until the dissolution of the empire over the course of World War I. From that point on, the British ruled the affairs of Egypt, more or less directly, until the 1950s. By then, the local opposition was no longer tenuous or immature. It was an ascendant resistance movement, materialising over time in a military coup, the rise of a charismatic leader, the reach of a nationalist ideology and the seizure of strategic assets, namely, the Suez Canal. When the occupa-

A decade earlier, in 1895, he had lobbied, successfully, for the issuing of a Khedival decree, which allowed him to create special tribunals, outside of the Egyptian judicial system, to try people accused of committing crimes against the British, to hand down sentences harsher than those allowed by the local penal code, and to deny anyone the right or process of appeal. Within two weeks of the events in Dinshaway, Lord Cromer convened such a tribunal. Fifty-two people were tried. Four men, accused of premeditated murder, were sentenced to death by hanging. Eight were to be flogged in public. Two were jailed for life. Ten were

The roller-coaster ride of Efflatoun's radical politics did not always correspond to her most daring aesthetic experiments. Up until the end of her prison term, the public and private dimensions of her life were in a state of almost jarring flux.

imprisoned for shorter terms. The corporal punishments were carried out the very next day, in the same village, for all to see.

Dinshaway quickly became a legend and a founding national myth, commemorated in poems, folk songs, novels and plays. To this day it is a staple passage in school textbooks. Scholars across the board regard the incident as a major turning point in the British occupation of Egypt: the moment when the colonial regime lost its legitimacy in the eyes of the people (Lord Cromer resigned a year later, in 1907, citing ill health) and the spark that burned for another fifty years, until it lit the movement for real Egyptian independence in the 1950s. (The British declared a protectorate over Egypt in 1914, which weathered a revolution in 1919, exiled the nationalist leader Saad Zaghloul and officially ended in 1922, though it remained in all but name until the Suez Crisis of 1956.) And yet there is some ambiguity in the story the Dinshaway episode tells, some uncertainty in the lessons it offers.

Efflatoun made her drawing, titled *Mathbahat Dinshaway* (*The Dinshaway*

Massacre), in a hopeful decade, when Egyptians fought for and won a measure of sovereignty over their own affairs, when the population was roused by the soaring, striving rhetoric of Gamal Abdel Nasser, whose programme of Arab nationalism with a socialist backbone gave people the dignities of work, personal betterment and national progress. But it was also an ominous decade, when Nasser adopted some of the strategies of the British, and the Ottomans before them: stifling criticism, silencing the opposition, removing rebellious figures from public discourse to torture them out of sight, in shadowy prisons. And of course, Lord Cromer's authoritarian streak has continued more or less undiminished through Nasser to the present day.

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Efflatoun, who passed away in 1989 at the age of 65, is now considered a national hero, a feminist icon and one of the most important figures in the history of modern Egyptian art. But at the time of her Dinshaway drawing, she was still in her twenties and relatively unknown. She fell in with the Egyptian surrealists as a teenager but was familiar only amongst the intelligentsia and the avant-garde. She came from an elite background but married a man from a poor, working-class family. She agitated for an end to the occupation but also for sweeping changes in the legal structure of the society and the status of women. She was a feminist and a communist at a time when Nasser was cracking down on ideologies that rivalled or critiqued his own. By necessity, Efflatoun's political activities remained largely hidden from view. At the same time, however, her paintings and drawings were beginning to reach an increasingly broad audience. She staged her first solo show at a Cairo gallery in 1952, followed by appearances in the Venice, São Paulo and Alexandria biennials.¹ She won prizes. Students protesting against British forces used her more revolutionary drawings for their posters. Then, in 1959, she disappeared. Although very few people were aware of it at the time, Efflatoun had been arrested and thrown in jail. While incarcerated, she painted furiously for years. She was released in 1963, and recuperated by the same regime that had imprisoned her. She became a respectful and respected figure

¹ Efflatoun's solo exhibition was held at Galerie Adam, Cairo in 1952. Her work was included in the inaugural Egyptian pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1952, the II Bienal de São Paulo in 1953 and the Alexandria Biennale in 1958.



Inji Efflatoun, *Girl and Monster*, 1942, oil on canvas, 80 × 130.5cm. Courtesy Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha

in an era of changed politics. To this day, the government-owned newspaper *Al-Ahram* refers to Efflatoun as a ‘rebel painter’ – a description that now sounds almost anodyne.

After her Dinshaway drawing, a decade of political ferment and her jail term, Efflatoun gave up her political activities and devoted herself to painting for another thirty years. The storminess of her early work steadily gave way to a more contemplative style, privileging the beauty of frictionless labour and bountiful landscapes. Certainly, the 1950s were the most fervent years of her life, in art as in politics, culminating in her incarceration, which appears to have ruptured her painting practice in two. But if the 1950s were clearly pivotal, they were also slightly paradoxical. The roller-coaster ride of Efflatoun’s radical politics did not always correspond with her most daring aesthetic experiments. Up until the end of her prison term, the public and private dimensions of her life were in a state of almost jarring flux. What was hidden and thrust into public view seemed to be always swapping places, one advancing as the other retrenched.

In 1985, Efflatoun began recording testimonies of her life on audio cassettes. She spoke of her childhood and adolescence, the

difficulty of feeling uprooted from her country and her culture, the harshness of what she saw in prison and in politics. Over time, the tapes became the raw material of her memoirs.² But even in the 1980s, she didn’t bring her story up to date: her memoirs end in 1963, with Efflatoun’s closing remarks on the need to make her prison time public, to convey what she had seen, to share her role as witness and observer. With her release, she said, the time had come to end her account. What came next would be private.³ This is a curious and somewhat paradoxical position – confinement as public, liberation as private – and it points to some of the more fascinating contradictions of Efflatoun’s life.

In Cairo’s major museums, Efflatoun’s work has been on almost constant view since the 1970s. She is regarded as a modern master. Ask artists working in Egypt today about her and they will tell you they have always known her, always been acquainted with her story and her work. Along certain lines of thought and in the wake of Arab nationalism, her reputation extends to the wider Middle East, to writers and thinkers in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Iraq, who know her mostly through her memoirs and see her primarily as a political activist

2 See Said Khayal (ed.), *Muthakirat Inji Efflatoun: Min al-Toufoula ila al-Sign* (Inji Efflatoun’s Memoirs: From Childhood to Prison, 1993), Cairo: Dar al-Thaqafa al-Jadida, 2014. Excerpts from her memoirs will appear in English in the anthology *Arab Art in the Twentieth Century: Primary Documents* (ed. Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers and Nada Shabout), New York: Museum of Modern Art, forthcoming in 2017.

3 See Iman Issa in conversation with Moyra Davey, ‘On Using “I” and First-Person Narration’, *Makhzin*, issue 2, 23 April 2016, available at <http://www.makhzin.org/issues/feminisms/on-using-i-and-first-person-narration> (last accessed on 3 July 2016).

who happened to have been an artist, too. Prison narratives, whether traumatic or transformational or both, constitute their own literary genre in the Arab world. While Efflatoun's memoirs do not aspire to the high literature of Sonallah Ibrahim's *That Smell* (1966), for example, or to Abdelrahman Munif's *East of the Mediterranean* (1975), it is interesting to weigh the importance of her story, her contribution to a cultural and historical moment as text, as material to be read, against the new-found interest in the visual, formal language of her art. A number of recent exhibitions have returned Efflatoun to public attention.⁴ As her work is circulating again, in wider contexts and amidst much-changed circumstances, it is giving rise to difficult but important questions about how the disjuncture between public and private lives speaks to current debates about the role of art in political upheaval today.



Efflatoun was born in 1924, the daughter of Cairo's wealthy, francophone, semi-feudal elite. Her experience of this privileged milieu was atypical. Her mother, Salha, married a distant cousin, a scientist named Hassan Efflatoun, when she was very young. (The family name was originally Kashef, replaced for generations by a nickname, Efflatoun, the Arabic translation of Plato, typically used to tease someone prone to excessive talk or *falsafa*, meaning philosophising.) At the age of eighteen, Salha divorced, but kept her married name. On her own she raised two daughters, Inji and her older sister Gulperie. She worked as a dressmaker; was the first woman in Cairo to own her own boutique; and managed a garment factory for decades, employing hundreds of workers. She spoke French at home and her daughters went to a Catholic boarding school, Le Collège du Sacré-Coeur, where they both eventually rebelled. At fourteen, Inji transferred to the Lycée Français, which was, in the late 1930s, as diverse as belle-époque downtown Cairo. Her classmates were foreign and Egyptian; Muslim, Christian and Jewish; rich, poor and middle class. She studied the French Revolution, Napoleon's invasion and Marxism. She illustrated her sister's

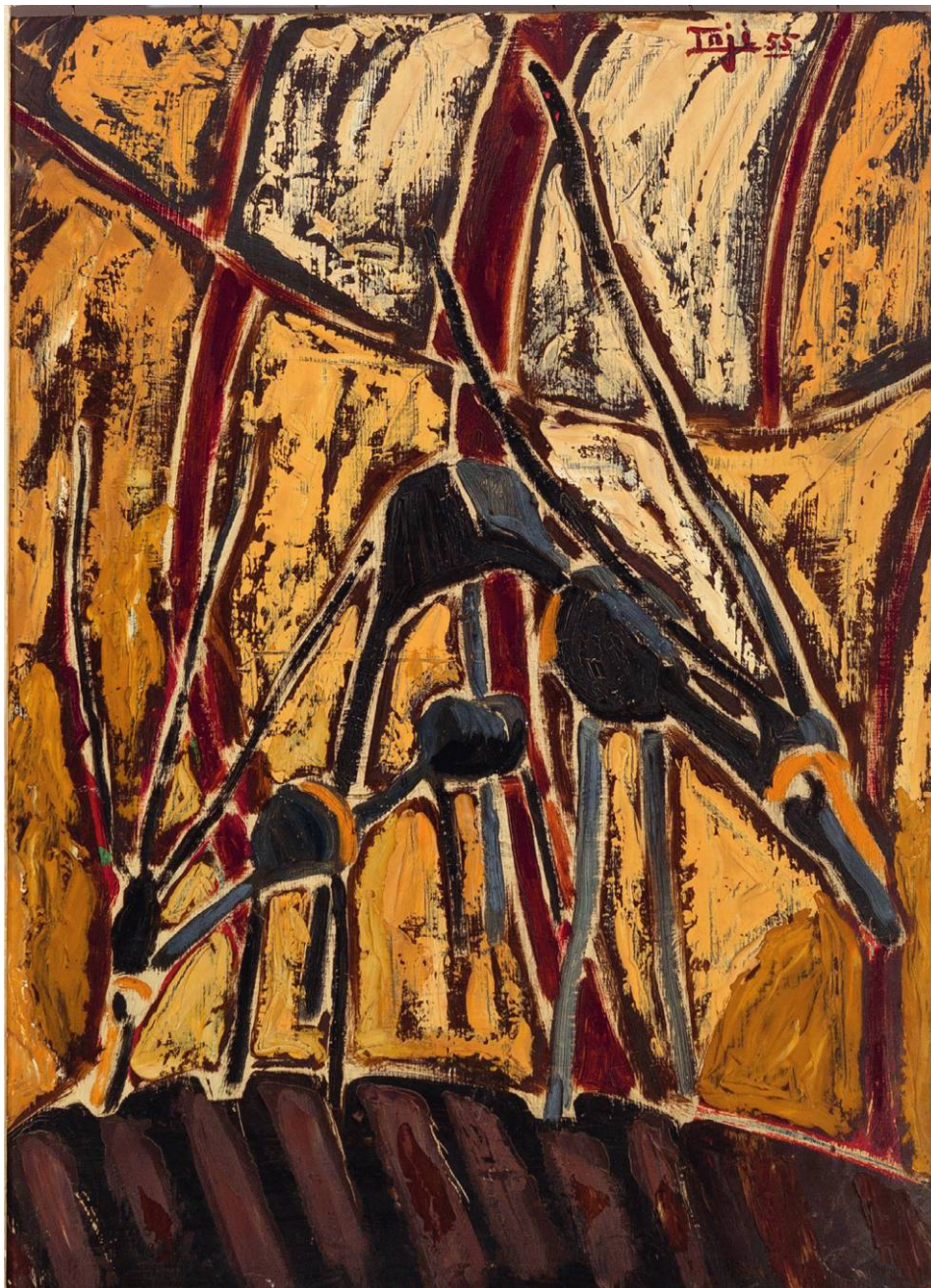
poems, stories and fairy tales.

One day, Efflatoun's mother showed those drawings to the legendary painter Mahmoud Said. Born to a prominent Egyptian family – his father was a prime minister, his niece a queen – Said worked as a lawyer in Alexandria all his life. But on the side he apprenticed with two Italian artists, studied drawing in France and shared a studio in the city's Ramleh district with the Greek painter Aristomenis Angelopoulos. He drew upon a mix of styles to paint society portraits, stormy landscapes and erotic nudes (all of them busty, including the pictures of mountains and seas). Some of his canvases seem to adopt, and play with, the pictorial elements of early Christian and Renaissance iconography. Said is now regarded as one of the major figures of modern Egyptian art, firmly canonical. In the late 1930s and early 40s, the first generation of Egyptian surrealists embraced Said, somewhat awkwardly, as their elder. Some three dozen artists and writers, including the Italian anarchist Angelo De Riz and the French novelist Albert Cossery, who were both living in Cairo at the time, had coalesced around the group known as Art and Freedom, founded by the poet Georges Henein and the painter Ramses Younan. Inspired by André Breton and Leon Trotsky, the objectives of the group were explicitly political and audacious: to tear down and remake the world. Their means were usually literary and artistic. In Said's paintings, they found prototypical examples of an art unfettered by the strictures of a conservative society, an art free to explore strangeness, sexuality, the eerie and uncanny. They included him in their rambunctious annual exhibitions. After looking at Efflatoun's drawings, Said told Salha that her daughter had real promise, and he urged her to find a tutor.

At the age of fifteen, Efflatoun began taking lessons from Kamel el-Telmissany, one of the central protagonists of Egyptian surrealism, who later abandoned painting altogether for a groundbreaking form of Marxist-driven, pseudo-documentary filmmaking. It's been said that Telmissany was initially reluctant to work with a student as privileged and sheltered as he assumed

4 These include 'Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World', National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington DC, 7 February–15 May 1994, curated by Salwa Mikdadi Nashashibi; 'All the World's Futures', 56th Venice Biennale, 9 May–22 November 2015, curated by Okwui Enwezor; 'Barjeel Art Foundation Collection - Imperfect Chronology: Debating Modernism I', Whitechapel Gallery, London, 8 September–6 December 2015, curated by Omar Kholeif; and 'Mother Tongue: Selected Works by Inji Efflatoun', Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, 11 October 2015–14 February 2016, curated by Leonore-Namkha Beschi.

Inji Eflatoun,
Deer, 1955, oil on
canvas, 38 × 55cm.
Courtesy Barjeel Art
Foundation, Sharjah



Eflatoun to be, until they began discussing Marx, class struggle and the *fellahin* (Egyptian peasantry). In the decade to follow, Eflatoun proved herself not only an artist of note but also a powerful political actor capable of advancing communist and feminist concerns.

The paintings and drawings that Eflatoun made early on – during the years of working with Telmissany, which constituted her brief but potent surrealist phase – are notable not only for their weirdness. *Girl and Monster*, an oil painting from 1942, is a whirl of malevolent lightning bolts, licking flames and mask-like faces dripping blood or drool or some kind of serpent from an anguished mouth. Her black-and-white

ink-on-paper drawings of dark, twisting dreamscapes – such as *Al-Majhool* (*The Unknown*), *Ta'mol* (*Contemplation*) and *Study*, all from the 1940s – seem set in the cavernous, subconscious interior of a female protagonist's mind. Often, the head or body of a woman appears below, to the side or tangled into menacing forms, which look, at times, like the muscle tissue or reproductive system of an anatomical drawing. In other words, these are works bending surrealism to the bracing study of a young woman's tumultuous physical and mental state, without any compulsion to make that space appear orderly or polite.

Eflatoun participated in two of Art and Freedom's landmark exhibitions.⁵ But she



was still only eighteen or nineteen years old. Just as Telmissany left behind the playful, expressionistic, automatic and exaggerated aesthetic of his paintings and caricature-like drawings to pursue a realist cinema with greater political force, Efflatoun soon shifted to a more social-realist mode of art-making. As such, her *Dinshaway* drawing, dating imprecisely to the 1950s, exists as a kind of orphan or pivot in her oeuvre. It bears the traces of surrealism in the

flattened dream space of multiple actions occurring simultaneously and in an other-worldly way, but it also points to the more activist, message-driven, explicitly Marxist works to come. Like Said, she borrows from traditions of religious painting, for example, illustrating the punishments meted out by the British like the Stations of the Cross. Like Telmissany, she was drawn toward more faithfully depicting real events and actual living conditions for the purpose of social

5 The Art and Freedom group organised five annual exhibitions in Cairo between 1940 and 1945. Efflatoun participated in the 1942 and 1943 editions.



Inji Efflatoun,
Tarqab (Expectation),
c.1940s. Courtesy
Barjeel Art
Foundation, Sharjah

critique. The framing of *The Dinshaway Massacre* is decorative but also didactic, with a row of seemingly triumphant freedom fighters at the top and a row of looming fascist soldiers, all helmets and rifles, running across the bottom. What remains unclear, however, is to whom the soldiers belong, which force is receding or encroaching on the space of the central action around the hanged man.

In 1942, Efflatoun joined a group of communist intellectuals, many of them Jewish, known as Iskra, who were especially open to the participation of women, both

Egyptian and foreign-born. Her colleagues in Iskra included a handful of human rights activists and now-famous women, such as the novelist Latifa al-Zayyat, author of *The Open Door* (1960), about a young Egyptian woman's political and sexual awakening in the midst of the British occupation. In 1945, with Zayyat, Efflatoun established an important organisation, the League of University and Institutes' Young Women, which famously paired class struggle with gender politics. The league, like many leftist organisations of its day, was chiefly concerned with getting the British out of

Egypt. But this was also a period of great uncertainty, when so much was up for grabs in terms of what it meant to be an Egyptian, an Arab, a person living in the Third World; a colonial or postcolonial subject; a woman, wife or daughter; an artist. For three years, Efflatoun set her art aside completely. She said it no longer made sense, that the disjuncture between her rarefied social milieu and the lives of everyday Egyptians was too great.⁶ Consider, also, that she had grown up speaking French. Her Arabic in the ascendancy of Arab nationalism was weak to non-existent. She was effectively regarded as a foreigner in her own country. For the league, she mobilised women to her cause – attending political congresses, writing pamphlets advocating for women's rights and travelling to the poorest corners of the country. She learned the language along the way. Those journeys, what she saw of her heritage and discovered of her history, brought her back, eventually, to art.

Throughout the 1950s, Efflatoun made angular nudes and portraits of peasants. She composed dense, heavily textured paintings of workers, protestors and the dispossessed. *The Builders* (1952) shows a small army of construction workers climbing the stairs of a tower block set against a sullen sky. *Filling Jars from the Nile* (c.1950s) is a magisterial canvas, featuring a trio of robust, colourful figures arranged on opposing diagonals across the frame, from far corner to far corner. That same sense of dramatic tilt characterises her more abstract compositions, such as the painting *Deer* (1955). The majority of Efflatoun's self-portraits, including *Artist in the Atelier* (c.1950s), show her as far more severe than she appears in photographs, which tend to show a woman who is intense but pretty, even sweet. The discrepancy is probably related to how hard she was on herself in her determination to learn Arabic and connect with her culture, to escape her privileged upbringing and be at one with the working class. To paint herself less pretty was also, in this sense, a political act.

Some years after her apprenticeship with Telmissany, Efflatoun studied with the Swiss painter Margo Veillon, who specialised in street scenes and painted vignettes of everyday life. She also took workshops with the Egyptian artist Hamed Abdallah, her equal in capturing the downtrodden and oppressed. In 1956, Efflatoun met and befriended the Mexican muralist

David Alfaro Siqueiros, who was visiting Egypt and almost certainly influenced her turn to social realism. In addition to *The Dinshaway Massacre*, she made numerous paintings commemorating explosive events and honouring the victims of imperial and colonial violence, including *We Cannot Forget* (1951), showing a funeral crowd, five coffins and raised fists, and *Port Said* (1957), depicting a child crouched beside the body of her dead mother. The latter is a gruelling image, tending toward overwrought. *Prisoners* (1957) plucks at similar emotions, but is in many ways as powerful as Francisco Goya's *El 3 de Mayo de 1808 en Madrid* (*The Third of May 1808 in Madrid*, 1814). It features some of the thickest, most expressive brushstrokes in Efflatoun's oeuvre. Two groups of figures in the foreground and background raise their arms, swoon and crumble to the ground in despair. One group appears to mirror the other, or perhaps they signify two points in the same sequence of terrible events. In the background looms an enormous institutional edifice, either the interior or exterior of a prison. But the putative foreground is also full of great, wide lines of pastel colour, pushing from the side of an anguished woman to the painting's edge, and appearing more like a dramatic sky than the dusty ground or the open space between subjects.

At the end of the 1940s, Efflatoun married – in secret, for love, announcing their union well after the fact with a wedding party – a public prosecutor, named Hamdi, who came from a family that was as poor as hers was wealthy. He was also involved in the nationalist cause at a time that was both right and wrong. Once Nasser rose to power and became the second Egyptian president after independence, he obliterated his rivals and imprisoned thousands of activists, including prominent artists and writers (many of whom continued to support him nonetheless). First Efflatoun's brother-in-law was arrested. Then her husband was arrested. Then she lost him, tragically, to a fatal brain haemorrhage just after his release from prison. Efflatoun went into hiding, disguising herself as a peasant. She was caught, arrested and jailed with Egypt's first 'class' of female political prisoners, 26 in total. In time her older sister was imprisoned, too.

Efflatoun served out a four-year jail term. She continued to work throughout her incarceration, convincing the guards

⁶ See Betty LaDuke, 'Egyptian Painter Inji Efflatoun: The Merging of Art, Feminism, and Politics', *NWSA Journal*, vol.1, no.3, Spring 1989, p.477.



Inji Efflatoun,
Prisoners, 1957, oil
on canvas, 29 × 42cm.
Courtesy Barjeel Art
Foundation, Sharjah

to bring her paints and canvases, to buy her works or allow her to sell them to her comrades, and to smuggle her paintings out into the world by wrapping them around their bodies. The imprisonment of women under Nasser was kept secret. It was never mentioned in the press. Efflatoun was held in a rural detention camp, which was disbanded when she and her fellow inmates – not only political prisoners but also murderers, thieves, pickpockets and prostitutes – were released. In the early years of her time there, Efflatoun painted in-your-face portraits of women, their faces brimming with worry, sorrow and rage. The style here is not dissimilar to the rather heavy-handed symbolism of, say, Ismail Shammout, whose paintings of the same era were used to keep dreams of Palestine alive. A certain amount of bombast was inherent to the visual culture of the era. Later, Efflatoun declared that she could no longer do portraits; the faces of other people had become too sad.⁷ At that point, she began to paint the trees outside of her prison – still thick and colourful, with dappled light on a dark ground. That aesthetic held through to the 1960s, and after her release, in paintings such as *The Trees Behind the Bars* (1963); *The Trees Behind the Wall* (1965); and the watercolour *Workers* (1964), showing a vortex of movement and flecked light over reaching bodies, robes and foliage.

This *Workers* (there are many others by Efflatoun) is a painting both gorgeous and perplexing, pulling viewers in to understand what is going on and how. Just as the Dinshaway drawing signals a shift from her surrealist period to her social-realist phase, *Workers* is a kind of bridge to Efflatoun's late style, where bare white canvas replaces an impasto black ground. Before prison, Efflatoun's paintings were often dark and lush and moody, arranged on dramatic tilting axes to convey the rage of the oppressed or the joys of workers in the field or the rhythms of a *mouled* (a saint's day festival). After prison, she devoted herself to painting landscapes and pastoral scenes of farmers tending their crops and women carrying bananas or eggplants – utopian dreams of societies at work, at peace with nature, open to wonder. These compositions grew increasingly aerated by what she often described as 'white light', the vibrational space of blank canvas left visible between brush strokes. Houses blend into hills, figures blend into trees and rock formations cast shadows reflected back from the Nile across a flattened space of stylised, evenly placed brushstrokes. Her imagery was no longer urban, but neither was it anti-modern. And watercolours such as *Beshendy Country* (1977), with its intimations of eyes and mouths and rows of sharp teeth in the landscape, are in many

7 *Ibid.*, p.482.



ways as dreamlike and strange as the drawings of her surrealist phase. Another later work, *Tree* (1976), is an abstract tangle of trunks and branches the colour and shape of bone.

Certain typologies occur again and again in her work: scenes of workers, farmers and resistance fighters; landscapes that Liliane Karnouk, in her survey of modern Egyptian art, ties to needlepoint, impressionism and the narrative patterns of Persian miniatures;⁸ and portraits of mothers, defiantly proud, holding children to suckle at their left breasts. ‘There was a time,’ writes Jacqueline Rose, in a recent essay on the contested terrain that motherhood has become in the current literary and political discourse,

when becoming a mother could signal a woman’s entry into civic life. [...] Established in her household as a mother, a woman gained new economic and affective power (she had ceased to be an object of exchange). She could fulfil her destiny only by becoming a mother, but according to one account of Greek motherhood, in doing so she became more rather than less engaged in the polity. Having a

*child ushered the woman on a path that led to something other than motherhood itself – an idea which modern times seem progressively to have lost. This version of motherhood expanded horizons. It gave women a voice.*⁹

Efflatoun never remarried, never had children and lived with her own mother for the rest of her life. She made her way into civic life alone, engaging in the polity when she was very young. She tried to change the world, in and out of her art, over the tortuous politics of a lifetime. In terms of formal experimentation and art historical import, Efflatoun packed the action of that lifetime into a wild and searching youth before decades of later work that appears as a kind of smooth and peaceful coda.

Perhaps to imagine her, in the 1950s, making a drawing inspired by an act of violence occurring half a century earlier is to cast both her early and late works in a different light. Perhaps her depictions of an idealised Egyptian past during three long decades of a dull and stolid dictatorship – from the death of Nasser through the years of Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak – should be understood less as a rupture than

Inji Efflatoun,
Workers, 1975.
Courtesy Safar Khan
Gallery, Cairo

8 Liliane Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art: 1910–2003*, Cairo and New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2005, p. 75.

9 Jacqueline Rose, ‘Mothers’, *London Review of Books*, vol. 36, no. 12, 19 June 2014, pp. 17–22, available at <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n12/jacqueline-rose/mothers> (last accessed on 3 July 2016).

as a shift in strategy, less an abrupt break than a decision to live differently and more cohesively, to reconcile public and private, artist and activist. Perhaps she found a peaceful art to calm a volatile life, or committed herself to utopic visions when other forms of art-as-social-critique had failed. Perhaps she found a way to avoid the instrumentalisation of her work by a revolution that had hardened into something far less interesting than what she had fought for as a young woman.

If issues of identity and belonging had been unsettled in the 1950s, not only for Efflatoun but for Egypt at large, a consequence of Nasser's crackdown in the 1960s was that art became useful. It was put in the service of a revolution and an ideology. It became an effective means of organising the image of Egypt and the Egyptians – aided by the fact that the Ministry of Culture's budget was enormous, second only to that of the Ministry of Defence (custodianship of the pyramids and the Great Sphinx of Giza was a factor). By the 1970s, the revolutionary rhetoric of the Nasser years had gradually softened into folklore, tradition and heritage. Egyptian identity was timeless; employed for life were the artists who painted it so. Extended through the Sadat and Mubarak regimes, this approach to artistic expression and cultural production led to the split between state-sponsored artists and initiatives, on the one side, and the independent art scene that began coalescing in Cairo and Alexandria in the 1990s, on the other. One might, therefore, more fairly appraise Efflatoun's work not in relation to itself, her surrealism, social realism or the rupture around her prison time, but rather in terms of how it complicates the idea of modern Egyptian art. Whether boldly or subtly, her paintings subvert the notion that modern Egyptian art is as ancient as the pharaohs, as unchanging as their monuments. They insist on the specificities of twentieth-century disasters and utopias, not only as subjects but also as styles that encode or embody a shape-shifting politics of dissent.



The Dinshaway episode that so galvanised Efflatoun's art in the 1950s has never really faded from the public imagination, popular culture or political discourse in Egypt. A museum commemorating the event opened

in the village in 1999. Thirty-two artists were commissioned to make new works about what happened there. The museum's expository texts are unsubtle: 'The British soldiers used to mistreat peasants, take their possessions, burn their crops and kill their children.'¹⁰ Then, five years ago, the incident was invoked in a very different if also devastating way. When Khaled Saeed was arrested in a cybercafé in Alexandria and beaten to death by the police in the winter of 2010, a handful of young human rights activists called it the Dinshaway of their day. And indeed, the furious uproar that followed led directly to the protests on Tahrir Square and the ousting of Mubarak. In this turn of events, the Egyptian government has taken on the role of oppressor, in place of the British occupation. The state is effectively at war with its own people. At a stretch, one might say that Efflatoun saw, in her drawing, the direction Egypt was heading in terms of dictatorship. But what era are we now living through, when an activist and feminist of her stamina seems so remote? When she appears so lucky to have lived as long as she did? What does it say about the work of artists then and now, about their public and private lives? And if Khaled Saeed's death was indeed the Dinshaway of the current generation, does that mean there could be another rebel painter out there, waiting for her time to come?

10 'Denshaway Museum', Egypt's State Information Service website, <http://www.sis.gov.eg/section/4840/5104?lang=en-us> (last accessed on 3 July 2016).



Inji Efflatoun,
Mathbah Al Kneeseh
(*The Church Altar*),
c.1940s, ink on
paper, 25 × 15.5cm.
Courtesy Barjeel Art
Foundation, Sharjah

Inji Efflatoun: White Light

– Anneka Lenssen

- 1) *It is forbidden to look at women.*
- 2) *It is forbidden for a girl to pay attention to her body while bathing, or for girls to look at the bodies of each other. Girls must wear a robe underwater.*
- 3) *Friendship is forbidden between girls, and anyone engaging in such friendship will be punished severely. Nor must one girl be alone with another.*
- 4) *It is forbidden to read alone, or to purchase one's own books. Therefore, our things will be searched continuously.*¹

Egyptian painter Inji Efflatoun (1924–89) could recall these prohibitions – just four points from the incalculably severe regime of the Sacré-Coeur school she attended as a girl – until her death. Propriety had mattered in Cairo's elite circles, and even though Efflatoun's family was Muslim, her father

some Marxist theory. Before she had even completed her baccalaureate, she had joined a communist group and commenced what would be a lifelong struggle to forsake the haute bourgeoisie of her upbringing in solidarity with Egypt's dispossessed classes.

Many writers have documented Efflatoun's commitment to crossing these worlds, and the biographical arc of her efforts to reconcile the dual path of artist and activist.³ Less considered to date is her ongoing negotiation, through painting, with the technologies of visibility that would both buttress and destabilise her political claims as a (radically) creative and female subject. Any account of her painting requires consideration of the duality of appearance in her work, including its constitution in the enforced somatophobia of her childhood.⁴ Asserting the presence of women in national life was central to her agitation against imperialism: the 1945 campaign for equal wages for equal work; her suffrage pamphleteering circa 1950; the women's protests and military drills she helped organise with the Popular Committee of Women's Resistance during the Suez stand-off in 1956.⁵ But in her artistic practice, the matter of corporeal presence often tended towards the obverse – as something like the dark psychical materials of the international surrealists, to whom she was affiliated at the start of her exhibition career in 1942. This essay examines the psychical structuring of visibility in Efflatoun's early surrealist paintings, which

Anneka Lenssen describes Inji Efflatoun's complex transformations of light and life.

sought the discipline of Catholic school for his daughters. Efflatoun could remember her first outright defiance of these rules as well. In the mid-1930s, at age twelve, she played hooky so as to indulge in the novel *White Fang* (1906), by Jack London, an adventure tale of human and non-human alliances.² Having thereby set a threshold for escape, she convinced her mother to allow her to transfer to the Lycée Français, where she studied French philosophy and

1 Inji Efflatoun, *Mudhakkirat Inji Aflatun (Inji Efflatoun's Memoirs)*, ed. Sa'ïd Khayyal, Kuwait: Dar al-Suad al-Sabah, 1993, pp.20–21. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.
2 See *ibid.*
3 The foremost account is Efflatoun's own memoir (cited above), which was transcribed from audiotapes and published posthumously in heavily edited form. Additional autobiographical statements, including some texts from her own speeches, may be found in the online archive 'Artist Inji Efflatoun Collection (*Majmu'a al-Fannana Inji Aflatun*)', in the Memory of Modern Egypt project of the Library of Alexandria (<http://modernegypt.bibalex.org/>), hereafter referred to as the MFIA archive. For biographical studies, see, amongst others, the special dossier 'Inji Aflatun', *Adab wa Naqd*, vol.18, December 1985, pp.93–122; Betty LaDuke, 'Egyptian Painter Inji Efflatoun: The Merging of Art, Feminism, and Politics', *NWSA Journal*, vol.1, no.3, Spring 1989, pp.474–85; and Mostafa El Razzaz, *Inji, Tahia, Gazbia: A Life's Journey*, Cairo: Gallery Picasso, 2014.
4 I draw here on Elizabeth Grosz's assessment of 'somatophobia', or fear of the body, in Western philosophy. See E. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.
5 In addition to the primary documents already cited, see Didier Monciaud, 'Les engagements d'Inji Aflatun dans l'Égypte des années quarante', *Cahiers d'histoire: Revue d'histoire critique*, no.126, 2015, pp.73–95.

displace and condense motifs of high society, in conjunction with the later inversion of visibility in her ‘white light’ (*al-daw’ al-abyad*) paintings of the 1970s, which proffer filaments of colour within blinding fields of illumination.⁶ The pairing reveals the artist’s conceptual play with relations of subject and object across Egypt’s shifting political regimes, as well as an imagination of their eventual release into an image-space of transformed signification.

Efflatoun had witnessed the predicaments of the female political subject long before she set foot in school. Her mother, Salha Efflatoun, who had married at the age of fourteen, divorced at nineteen (in 1924, the year of Inji’s birth), precipitating great social and economic upheaval for the family. It was not until 1936 that Salha managed to claim her independence as a single mother, when she launched Egypt’s first fashion house, *Maison Salha*. The enterprise represented a new way of capitalising on social status, and was backed by Talaat Harb, a banker and nationalist entrepreneur who sought to develop the country’s cotton industries as leverage against foreign interests. As art historian Nadia Radwan has noted, modernisers in Egypt, as elsewhere, took up the notion of the ‘new woman’ as a focal point for perceived changes to the social order, with the fashionably dressed woman standing as both reflection and initiator of change.⁷ These self-consciously shifting categories, tied as they were to regimes of consumption, proved to be double-edged for the Efflatoun women. They emancipated Salha from her family’s direct patronage, but also made her dependent on the circles of the Egyptian monarchy and their tastes. From the same rarified yet conflicted position of privilege, Inji accessed her first artistic training, but

also pushed through it to more illicit images of the imagination and unconscious. As a child, she had accompanied her father, an entomologist, into the field, where she filled notebooks with careful depictions of insect morphology. As an adolescent, she studied with tutors drawn from the country’s large and disparate pool of Francophone intellectuals, as was common for privileged Egyptians. In 1940, her mother hired Kamel el-Telmissany, a writer, painter, film-maker and founding member of *Art and Freedom*, the coalition of Egyptian avant-gardes who espoused international surrealism as a model of anti-fascist resistance.⁸ Telmissany’s ‘bewitching’ pedagogy focussed on the possibilities for integrating art with life, and for expressing self and society.⁹ Efflatoun would work through the jolt of these lessons in her painting, expressing the interior subjects of gendered, classed anxieties: dream imagery of vengeful trees, creeping vegetation and serpents that grasp at other beings – including frightened young women.

Efflatoun later described how socialism had, in the 1940s, proposed a solution to the problems posed by Egypt’s grave social inequalities that seemed at once rational and just.¹⁰ Telmissany’s avant-garde circle agreed, but added the provision that the irrational be understood as liberating – that images, whether in dreams or paintings, be recognised as a productive non-rational interior to the exteriorised capitalist economy. Ramsis Yunan’s important 1940 essay ‘The Dream and the Reality’ articulates the political potential of surrealism’s Freudian materials with great clarity.¹¹ An exploration of the imperial origins of modernity and its stakes for the role of art and beauty in a new society, it outlines the deep contradictions of the time, even charac-

6 Efflatoun seems to have developed the term ‘white light’ in cooperation with the critic Naim Attiya, who contributed the essay ‘al-Hawa’ wa-l-Nur fi Lawhat Inji Aflatun al-Jadida’ to her 1977 exhibition materials, held in the MFIA archive. My reading of the notion here also draws from Walter Benjamin, ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’ (1929), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927-1934* (trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith), Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999, pp.207-21.

7 Nadia Radwan, ‘Inji Efflatoun: Multiple Idioms of an Egyptian “New Woman”’, in *FOCUS, Works from the Mathaf Collection / Mother Tongue: Selected Works by Inji Efflatoun* (ed. Leonore-Namkha Beschi), Doha: Mathaf - Arab Museum of Modern Art, forthcoming in 2017.

8 For more on Art and Freedom, see Donald LaCoss, ‘Egyptian Surrealism and “Degenerate Art” in 1939’, *Arab Studies Journal*, vol.18, no.1, Spring 2010, pp.78-117. LaCoss details the international aspects of the network; the Cairo group was proclaimed on January 1939 in alliance to the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art (FIARI), which André Breton and Leon Trotsky had established from Mexico in 1938. On the simultaneity of the connections between surrealist nodes, see also Sam Bardaouil, ‘Dirty Dark Loud and Hysteric: The London and Paris Surrealist Exhibitions of the 1930s and the Exhibition Practices of the Art and Liberty Group in Cairo’, *Dada/Surrealism* [online journal], vol.1, no.19, 2013, available at <http://ir.viowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1273&context=dadasur> (last accessed on 2 August 2016).

9 I. Efflatoun, *Mudhakkirat Inji Aflatun*, op. cit., p.30.

10 See the speech ‘La Femme Créatrice de Valeurs’, which Efflatoun presented to the PEN Club in Paris in 1975, in the MFIA archive.

11 ‘Al-Hulm wa-l-Haqiqa’ first appeared in March 1940 in the short-lived journal *al-Tatawwur*, and is reprinted in Ramsis Yunan, *Dirasat fi al-Fann*, Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi, 1969, pp.36-42.

Archival document showing the Egyptian delegation to the Congrès International des Femmes, Paris, 1945, with Inji Efflatoun in centre. Courtesy © MoME* - Bibliotheca Alexandrina



terising the ‘consumptive workers’ in Talaat Harb’s urban factories as sacrificial subjects of modern plenty.¹² As Yunan knew, the preceding years had been marked by the rapid expansion of labour in the textile sector, with recent strikes, a bank crisis and depression. Against these structural crises, he argued that the fact that workers still dreamed unbidden visions could be understood as the human capacity for revolution. The essay’s metaphors of haunting and spectral inhabitation – it describes the fear of hunger perching over the city like a ghost, holding its inhabitants down until nighttime – offer an interpretive key to Efflatoun’s early imagery. The painting *Girl and the Beast*, for example, which she exhibited with Art and Freedom in 1942, is a landscape of heavily outlined bushes and cacti beneath a ‘sulphurous’ night sky populated by alienated beings, including a large, transmogrifying bird and a tiny, flying girl.¹³

Images commanded real powers, in other words. They were also highly mediated: as Georges Henein, a leader of Art and Freedom, declared in a 1939 speech, artists

had been thrown open to social melee, with even the most distant signs of distress reaching them instantly by ‘radio, cinema, the press – wonderful, unexpected means of human communication’.¹⁴ Critical vocabulary also crossed between these media. Responses to Efflatoun’s painting, which employed a colourisation technique of outline and tone resembling glass painting, often mobilised cinematic concepts, describing the images as a kind of light projection. Henein described *Girl and the Beast* as communicating by means of an ‘expressive transparency’ achieved by Efflatoun’s composing dream elements in spaces that seem to emit light from underground.¹⁵ Telmissany’s renderings in the period also display glints of colour from beneath a heavy black tone, which his colleagues read by allusion to stage and film actors, for whom external roles might overtake the body (as in, for example, his portraits of hashish eaters from the Egyptian underworld).¹⁶ Efflatoun’s protagonists can seem to appear in a state of possession as well: trees glow with colour from within and the titular ‘girl’ of *Girl and*

12 Ibid., p.37.
13 See Marcelle Biagini’s review of the exhibition, translated into Arabic and reprinted in ‘Inji Aflatun’, *Adab wa Naqd*, op. cit., p.97.
14 Quoted in Marc Kober, ‘Georges Henein, Reporter de l’Universel’, *Mélusine*, no.15 (ed. Myriam Boucharenc), 2005, p.197.
15 Georges Henein, review in *La Semaine égyptienne*, May 1942, translated into Arabic and reprinted in ‘Inji Aflatun’, *Adab wa Naqd*, op. cit., p.99.
16 The description is Ramsis Yunan’s in response to Telmissany’s illustrations to Albert Cosseray’s short story collection *Les Hommes Oubliés de Dieu* (1941), quoted in Samir Ghareib, *Surrealism in Egypt and Plastic Arts*, Cairo: Ministry of Culture, 1986, p.52.



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the Beast looks mummified, as if returning from the dead. Her blue party dress signals the cinematic role of the damsel in distress. Understood as a psychic projection, she also signifies the gendered shame of her appearance within a field of spectatorial desire.

Another member of Art and Freedom, the photographer Hassia, described, in 1941, the capacities of her camera in terms of inverted power: ‘photography allows me to escape one man and possess all men’.¹⁷ Within their group, it was possible to ask whether the one who commanded the picture might also master the (female) self. These were the questions that Efflatoun, in the same decade, began to inflect into a social register, including in a suite of ink drawings on paper that probe both the glittering duplicity of modernity and the false consciousness of religion. As a set, they comprise parables of the hollow progress of civilisation. One shows a mendicant leaving a ruined forest to approach a housing development defined by hostile interiority,

a tragedy witnessed by a young woman’s head depicted in sightless profile. In another, a young woman sits in a modern living space, shielding her face from an unholy apparition of gnarled roots and hair. And one drawing makes use of outright Christian imagery, of supplication to a creator: a forest chapel becomes an interior choked by votive smoke converging upon a crucifix. Again, the question of looking at another woman is paramount, as the viewer sees only the backs of the women kneeling in prayer, their eyes presumably shut to the profane world of the living.

The Art and Freedom group, as Henein and others saw it, was to be defined by a transnational élan recognising neither religion nor government statutes as barriers.¹⁸ This was not the model of solidarity Efflatoun adopted in her subsequent political work, however. As a leader in the Egyptian women’s movement, she relentlessly petitioned the Egyptian nation-state for rights.¹⁹ In 1945, she

17 Quoted on the handbill to the Second Exposition de l’Art Indépendant, Cairo, 10–25 March 1941, in the MFIA archive.

18 See G. Henein, ‘L’Art en Egypte (X): El Telmissany’, *Don Quichotte*, vol.17, 29 March 1940; cited in Patrick Kane, *The Politics of Art in Modern Egypt: Aesthetics, Ideology and Nation-Building*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2012, p.202, note 51.

Inji Efflatoun, *Girl and the Beast*, 1941, oil on canvas, 70 × 55cm. Courtesy Museum of Inji Efflatoun, Sector of Fine Arts, Ministry of Culture, Egypt

Previous spread:
Inji Efflatoun,
Abo Sella Valley in Sinai, 1985, oil on canvas, 56 × 41cm

attended a much publicised conference in Paris organised by the Women's International Democratic Federation, which consolidated her position as a communist in the eyes of the Egyptian intelligence apparatus.²⁰ She subsequently stopped painting for several years, finding herself unable to reconcile her artistic pursuits with her activism, while concomitantly facing public judgment from journalists and colleagues who doubted her commitment to class solidarity, branding her 'the communist who owns forty dresses'.²¹ She got married in 1948, to a leftist lawyer (who would die unexpectedly, in 1957). Importantly for my considerations here, when Efflatoun did return to art, in 1949, it was by a plunge into the outdoors, painting under the blazing sun of the Nile Delta, at the nexus of the earth and labouring people. In her recommitment to painting as a framed expression of the social self, Efflatoun split from the surrealists' dream image to accord her work a capacity to rally political awareness. For example, her memoirs describe this potential at play in her first solo exhibition, held in Cairo only four months before the 23 July 1952 Free Officers' coup d'état to oust the monarchy. She had depicted the angry anxiety of the times, painting martyred sons and clashes with British occupying troops as well as subsidiary struggles in the patriarchal home.²² Efflatoun then donated the set to the University of Cairo, where they were hung as a tool for 'cadre building'.²³ Once in situ, however, to Efflatoun's gratification, they became signs of continued volatility as students photographed the images for use on protest posters. Government investigators came to cover the paintings, a move that was momentarily reversed after the July revolution, only to be instituted once again when the works continued to cause 'problems'.²⁴

And yet, as we also understand from Efflatoun's autobiographic narration, she formed her lasting sense of self as an artist within Cairo's women's prisons – a radically contracted space representing, in turn, the inside of the Egyptian regime. In 1959, the security apparatus of then-President Gamal

Abdel Nasser began to pre-emptively clamp down on communist activists, including, for the first time in Egyptian history, incarcerating women as political prisoners. Efflatoun spent four years in jail. She would speak of the experience subsequently as an enrichingly *human* one, wherein gender and class differentiation was levelled.²⁵ She also came to claim that the reduction of her liberties enhanced her capacity for aesthetic apperception, intensifying the wonder of even the smallest quantum of nature available to her gaze.²⁶ Prison even enacted a revaluation of Efflatoun's celebrity as an artist, for she was able to use her status as a recognised Egyptian painter as exchangeable currency: she struck a deal with her prison warden to bring her paints if she promised to sell the finished works (via her sister) for cash. The resulting paintings offer a poignant amalgam of her romantic regard for nature and the materialist dimension of her hustle. They show windows but not openings. Cardboard supports are filled with the heavy impasto presence of blossoms and trees, blocking in the painting-as-window with the pigments she had so carefully procured.

When Efflatoun was released in July 1963, she was taken by family to the countryside – to its immersive outdoor territories of farms, fruits and palms, as well as the continuous labour of cultivation. The landscapes she painted at this time negotiate the open air as optical experience rather than as touchable stuff. They appear as vibrating braids of primary colours, the light-filled after-images of her imprisonment. The stakes of such an immediate inversion – from interiority in the carceral sphere to an unbounded exteriority – must have felt uncertain. Efflatoun's work from this transitional moment again negotiates the problem of the support in relation to its object. If 1940s paintings such as *Girl and the Beast* appear almost as a celluloid frame, where the fleeting perception of contradictions is given black illumination, then Efflatoun's post-prison paintings use surface as a sheet of unifying light. This is quite

19 Again, Efflatoun's work in this sphere has been well documented. Consider, for example, her newspaper editorials, such as 'The Role of Women in Production', which appeared in *al-Masa'* on 29 October 1958. A French typescript is in the MFIA archive.

20 See D. Monciaud, 'Les engagements d'Inji Aflatun', *op. cit.*

21 I. Efflatoun, *Mudhakkirat Inji Aflatun*, *op. cit.*, p.98.

22 See 'Inji Aflatun', *Adab wa Naqd*, *op. cit.*, p.102.

23 Letter from the General Director, University City, to Inji Efflatoun, 19 March 1952, in the MFIA archive.

24 See 'Inji Aflatun', *Adab wa Naqd*, *op. cit.*, p.102.

25 See B. LaDuke, 'Egyptian Painter Inji Efflatoun', *op. cit.*, p.479.

26 See I. Efflatoun, 'La Femme Créatrice de Valeurs', *op. cit.*



Inji Efflatoun, c.1969, in front of *Afternoon at the Village* (1967). © Bruno Barbey/Magnum Photos

literally the case in a series of sketches she completed on glass in 1964, each showing a female labourer amid flecks of colour.²⁷ These works become fully visible only when placed against a white backing, which, through its opacity, serves to reveal the positive image. Made brilliantly white against the dancing colours, the backing becomes reminiscent of cotton, the ‘white gold’ of the Egyptian economy; equally, it proffers a visual reminder of Efflatoun’s concern for vision as a field of intersubjective connection. She made similar sketches on cream paper in the same period, and these convert bodies into touches of pigment, connoting a tactile experience of cotton flocking or even electrical filaments.

Following her release, Efflatoun was restored to the national cultural apparatus with an almost breathtaking speed. In 1965 she received a government fellowship to support her painting full-time, and by 1967 her work was being presented in solo exhibitions in Rome and Paris. By then, her paintings on canvas were tending toward spare landscapes: rock formations in Aswan, banana groves, small villages perched upon cliff faces. These were not easily reconciled with her previous status as an oppositional figure, and Henein, in fact, voiced his doubts. By then he had left Cairo for Paris, where he was editor-in-chief of *Jeune Afrique*. When Efflatoun’s exhibition opened in Paris in July 1967 the magazine published a short review;

although unattributed, its reference to Art and Freedom as the ‘first avant-garde movement in Egypt’ makes Henein’s authorship obvious.²⁸ Hardly managing even a tepid endorsement, Henein casts Efflatoun’s turn to the artistic concerns of light and colour as an obdurate one. Looking at the dashed colours of paintings such as *Afternoon at the Village* (1967), a vibrating landscape of horizontal rock flows, he

Efflatoun split from the surrealists’ dream image to accord her work a capacity to rally political awareness.

supposed that they were offered as stand-ins in for the euphoria of Arab dance and pattern.²⁹

Strikingly, this particular painting is observable amid a second set of images: a portfolio of photographic portraits of ‘Arab intellectuals’ shot by Magnum photographer Bruce Barbey in the restive Middle East of 1969. One photograph by Barbey captures Efflatoun, in a crisp houndstooth dress and pearl earrings, talking in front of three recent works, all framed. *Afternoon at the Village* hangs peculiarly low on the wall, at hip height. It would have occupied the artist’s peripheral vision, flashing into view from time to time as a kind of counter-image or opening to a tactile environment. Quite

27 I wish to thank Ms. Sherwet Shafei for speaking with me about Efflatoun’s small group of glass paintings from this period.

28 ‘Expositions: Inji Efflatoun’, *Jeune Afrique*, 30 July 1967, pp.59–60. A feeling of political disappointment would have been pervasive at the time of Henein’s writing, for the Egyptian and other Arab armies had just suffered defeat at the hands of the Israeli army in the Six-Day War of June 1967.

29 *Ibid.*

Inji Eflatoun,
Collecting Eggplant,
c.1960s, oil on glass,
16 × 9cm. Courtesy
Safar Khan Gallery,
Cairo



rightly, Henein had focussed on the question of *how* the artist had regarded and possessed her objects in completing a painting like this, noting that Eflatoun took the downtrodden labourers of the countryside as her beloved subject, yet manipulated her new medium, light and color, with a feeling of joy. In Henein's estimation the landscapes show nature as a manifestation 'to a woman', which is to say, present nature in its almost oppressive, fructifying plenitude.³⁰ Henein's characterisation, however absurd in its sexism, carries the resonance of Art and Freedom's concern for subject-object inversions and for the interpenetration of

the technological and biological in the image. This landscape had imposed itself, demanding registration by another body. But, with that openness, might there be transformation; might worldly light have flooded Eflatoun to the point of visual impairment?

A professional culmination of this process – a kind of *self*-negation in contemplation – would be declared in 1977, when Eflatoun showed three years of new work in a solo exhibition in Cairo titled 'White Light'.³¹ The paintings made openness to nature a stated goal, and used the canvas support – formerly accorded the role of a medium – as a readable participant in

30 *Ibid.* The author says the views are 'heavy with sap', which may have been meant as a reference to cotton production in particular.

31 Eflatoun's tenth solo exhibition, 'White Light: 1974-1977', was on view at the Egyptian Center for International Cultural Cooperation, Cairo, 7-17 March 1977. Photographs and additional documentation are in the MFIA archive.



allegories of illumination and need. In an essay written for the exhibition, Naim Attiya described the pictorial effects as ritualised compositions restoring politics to intersubjective relations – a new spirit drifting over villages, making workers in the field conscious of their central political roles.³² Other critics saw nationalist emblems, such as Arab writing, or the spiritually significant two-dimensionality of Eastern aesthetics.³³

But the most rewarding reading of such a valorised openness, I propose, would come much later, at the 2015 Venice Biennale. There, a series of Efflatoun sketches from the 1970s and 80s – a marker drawing of an orange harvest, a watercolour of bricklayers emphasising the tactility of colour in a white void, and so on – were exhibited in a single display case, where they faced several directions, as if in mid-activation. This had

the decisive effect of shifting attention to the margins of her practice, the points at which one image links to all the others – as apertures, or as film cells, or as mock-ups for a poster. Indeed, other material from Efflatoun’s personal archives may be added to the ad hoc musée imaginaire of the Venice installation, allowing further exploration of the porosity of the distinction between looking and using in her composition process.³⁴ Among the paintings, drawings

biography. Some help in this regard may be drawn from Walter Benjamin’s writing on surrealism, circa 1929, which conjures a transformative image-space to be achieved by profane illumination – a materialist, anthropological process of corporeal reconfiguration in image. Benjamin’s essay moves through a series of problems that Efflatoun had also recognised in her surrealism: the destructive power of Catholicism; the need to overcome (bour-



Inji Efflatoun, undated preparatory photographs. Left, courtesy © MoME* – Bibliotheca Alexandrina. Right, courtesy Hassan Mahmoud

Opposite: Inji Efflatoun, untitled sketch on paper, 1964. Courtesy © MoME* – Bibliotheca Alexandrina

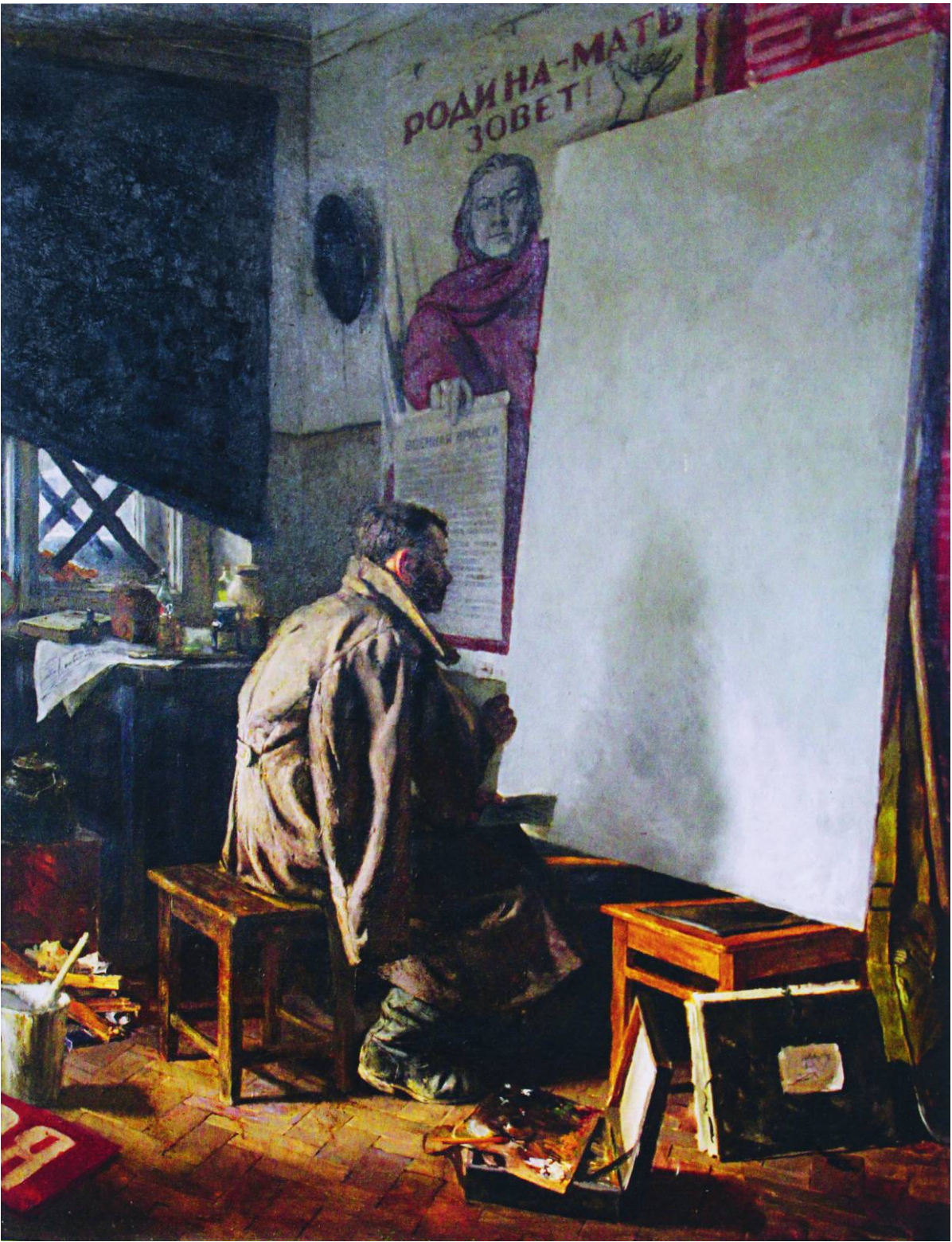
and clippings she had accrued, there are also photographic images of orange and cotton harvest, showing women working in a dappled grove of backlit trees. Unlabelled and undated, their colour saturation is suggestive of 1970s commercial processing, and their compositions – suppressed horizon lines and attenuated rather than abundant volumes – recall the preoccupations of ‘white light’. That Efflatoun kept them must be significant. Did she take them herself? They seem to offer evidence of a continued effort to invert viewer privilege, here in photographic documentation of spaces composed from shared, interpenetrating light.

I do not wish to conclude this essay by evaluating Efflatoun’s success in what was, from the start, a vexed and lonely exploration of visuality. I hope to have succeeded in showing the multiform openness of her work as it persisted against the crushing weight of both personal and national

geois) discretion concerning one’s existence; and, of course, the forever-vain efforts of the intelligentsia to make contact with the proletarian masses.³⁵ The alternative was the image-space – at issue in Efflatoun’s later paintings – where political materialism and physical creatureliness share a psyche with dialectical justice.³⁶ In repurposing light as an unpainted pictorial immanence, she took another turn against the original sin of somatophobia. In the eye, which is to say inside the look, the representational image is collapsed into the body. And this body, peculiarly, ceases to be gendered because it cannot be seen. These are the uncomfortable provocations of Efflatoun’s work, and they are destabilising precisely because they escape the painterly frame of expression and demonstration.

- 32 See N. Attiya, ‘al-Hawa’ wa-l-Nur fi Lawhat Inji Aflatun al-Jadida’, *op. cit.* The political subtext of Attiya’s text is difficult to parse, as it refers to elections and to agricultural workers finding their voice. This, and the use of terms like ‘opening’, may constitute a response to the Egyptian bread riots of January 1977, which had succeeded in changing then-President Sadat’s plan to eliminate food subsidies.
- 33 See Fatima Ali, ‘Fannana Tarsumu ... al-Faragh’, *Akhir Sa’a*, 30 March 1977, in the MFIA archive.
- 34 I do mean to invoke André Malraux’s notion of a photographic collection of formal affinities, an idea that was very much a product of the 1930s, and which had been of interest to members of the Art and Freedom coalition.
- 35 See W. Benjamin, ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’, *op. cit.*
- 36 *Ibid.*, p.217.

* The Bibliotheca Alexandrina ‘Memory of Modern Egypt’ (MoME) project is a collaborative effort between the International School of Information Science and the Special Projects Department. It is a digital repository documenting the last 200 years of Egypt’s modern history through tens of thousands of varying items, such as documents, pictures, audios, videos, maps, articles, stamps, coins, etc. organised in an index of fourteen different material types. See <http://modernegypt.bibalex.org>



Gely Korzhev, *V dni vojny* (*In the Days of War*), 1954, oil on canvas, 194 × 160cm.
Courtesy State Art Museum of Uzbekistan, Tashkent

The Gely Korzhev Retrospective in Moscow: Why Him? Why Now?

—Anders Kreuger

A couple of years ago, as I was going through the twentieth-century section of the Tretyakov Gallery, in the more or less modernist Central House of Artists, overlooking the Moscow River, something made me stop in front of a rather large and almost square canvas. It would, I first thought, have looked more at home a few kilometres away, in the museum's other building, an eclectic pre-revolutionary affair displaying earlier periods of Russian art. The self-confident anatomical rendering of a lifeless adolescent boy prostrate on a stretch of dry and curiously unidentifiable ground made me think of paintings by the likes of Axel Gallén-Kallela – 'identity art' for the turn of the twentieth century, pictures to make Finland (or Norway, or Serbia, or any other awakening nation) great again.

In the canvas we are looking at, the Russian peasant's homespun outfit, complete with birchbark shoes, comes across like a film costume: a sign of a time that is not ours, articulated within a modern system of mass communication. Anachronistic, in other words. And while this is certainly not photorealism (to begin with, where is the blood if someone has just fallen to his death?) but an old masterish kind of painting [...] with limbs and props studied from nature, there [...] is something cinematic to the whole composition. It is as if the eye is led to

dwell on this horizonless close-up for only an instant before zooming out to take in the surroundings: the treetop – or is it a watchtower – from which the luckless aviator jumped, possible bystanders, a wider pre-industrial landscape with attractively stacked clouds.

Other Soviet masters of the visually

Anders Kreuger visits the posthumous retrospective of Gely Korzhev in Moscow and discusses the attempted revival of Socialist Realism in today's Russia.

persuasive, for example, the painter Alexander Deineka or the film-maker Andrei Tarkovsky, chose different ways to render the popular tale about the young serf Nikitka, who managed to survive an attempt at flying only to be severely punished by Ivan the Terrible for challenging his fixed position in life.¹ In comparison to the painting we are looking at now, Gely Korzhev's *Egorka letun* (*Egorka the Flyer*, 1976–80), their images of early Russian scientific-technical progress are more panoramic, more social and, certainly in Deineka's case, truer to the didactic spirit of Socialist Realism. Yet all three authors clearly belong to the same cultural system. In the Russian-speaking world, images are, first and foremost, seen as narrative devices, and the interpretation of images is, above all, about grasping the ideas and ideologies coded into them as stories. Art as education and social commentary may be both progressive and reactionary; this is demonstrated time and again by Russian art history.

As an informed outsider, both fascinated by and critical of Russia and its art, I choose not to try to emulate my respected colleagues from inside that system. I will not start a discussion about 'what the artist wanted to say by this', or what the Icarus motif might have meant to Soviet viewers in the late 1970s, a period widely denounced as 'stagnant' only ten years later. We will have to imagine the reasons why anyone would want to fly over a system of strictly enforced happiness. Let us instead take a closer look at the author of *Egorka the Flyer*, a figure of extraordinary abilities whose progress through almost 90 years of Russian history is instructive in many ways. Three years after his death, and 25 years after Boris Yeltsin had the USSR dismantled to get rid of his rival Mikhail Gorbachev, a heavyweight Russian state institution is celebrating Korzhev's oeuvre. Why him? Why now?

1 Alexander Deineka's painting *Nikitka – pervyi ruskii letun* (*Nikitka, the First Russian Flyer*, 1940) shows the protagonist, harnessed to a Leonardo da Vinci-esque wing construction, in mid-air next to a medieval brick tower. Andrei Tarkovsky opens the film *Andrei Rublev* (1966) with a peasant genius jumping to his predestined freedom-in-death. See Maria Tsantsanoglou, 'The Soviet Icarus: From the Dream of Free Flight to the Nightmare of Free Fall', in Christina Lodder, Maria Kokkori and Maria Mileeva (ed.), *Utopian Reality: Reconstructing Reality in Revolutionary Russia and Beyond*, Leiden: Brill, 2013, pp.43–56, available at http://www.academia.edu/10725279/The_Soviet_Icarus_From_the_Dream_of_Free_Flight_to_the_Nightmare_of_Free_Fall (last accessed on 15 August 2016).

The last of the great Socialist Realists, Gely Korzhev followed the tradition as faithfully as he broke with it, was influenced by modernist trends, neorealist cinema and monumental art. Ignoring clichés, he never questioned the fundamentals of his method – realistic representation and social relevance. He was faithful to his art and convinced that a painting was capable of representing the boundless complexity of the modern world in its entirety, served as testimony to truth and time, and convey [sic] the artist’s substantial and thoroughly thought-out statements.

Never separating the personal from the social, Korzhev possessed the courage and assumed the right to speak on behalf of the people as well as himself. He was the first of the Soviet painters to address the dreadful traumas inflicted by the War, always focusing on the individual, unique and irreplaceable figure – the hero, full of dignity in grief and in death. With his powerful temperament of a social leader Korzhev was elected to many important posts, such as the Chairman of the Board of Russia’s Union of Artists, member of the Supreme Council of the Russian Federation and member of Russia’s Committee for State Prizes in literature and the visual arts.

– State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow²

Gely Korzhev-Chuvelev (1925–2012) was a figurative painter with a perfect understanding of Socialist Realism, the officially sanctioned way of making art images in the USSR. Realist in name and socialist in intention (or ambition), these images should be regarded as ideas (in the pre-Platonic sense of plans for things not yet made or built) rather than reflections of the reality that the Party and the State and the People were able to create. Korzhev may have stretched the rules – written and unwritten – but he never ignored or broke them. Like his father, a one-time Constructivist architect who became a renowned park designer, he productively coexisted with the system, and with the changes it underwent as it ‘thawed’ in the late 1950s,³ partially froze again in the second half of the 1960s, and eventually melted away in the ‘transparency’ (*glasnost*) of the late 1980s.

Gely, by the way, is an unusual first name. It is the Russian version of Helios, the personification of the sun in ancient Greek mythology (and incidentally, the deity who melted the wax in Icarus’s prosthetic wings). Korzhev took visible pleasure in making his pictures radiant and uplifting, despite (or because of) their pointedly sombre content and voluminous form grounded in materiality. Although he never belonged to any group or movement in art, he has been associated with the ‘severe style’ of Soviet Socialist Realism in the late 1950s, which signalled, in the work of painters such as Viktor Popkov or Tair Salakhov, a new freedom from mandatory enthusiasm.⁴ The term itself was coined only in 1969, by the critic Alexander Kamensky, in reference to classical antiquity. It should be noted that in Greek sculpture the severe style of 490–450 BCE foreshadowed the classical style, while in Soviet painting it was a tentative response to the grand style of mature and late Stalinism. The underlying insight is sound: a somewhat lighter political regime needed a somewhat darker aesthetic to remain credible.

Korzhev started exhibiting in the wait-and-see cultural climate of the mid-1950s, after Stalin’s death but before his legacy was put into question, and he always seemed able to paint what he wanted. Or perhaps he learned to want what was possible, just before it became *too* possible. Korzhev was a model student of the Soviet art system, professionally trained in drawing and painting since the age of eleven. He and his classmates spent the most dangerous

2 Official (and therefore uncorrected) English version of a wall text at the entrance of the Gely Korzhev retrospective at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, on view from 23 March to 14 June 2016 and curated by Zemfira Tregulova in collaboration with N. Aleksandrova, F. Balakhovskaya, T. Kruzhkova, O. Polyanskaya and E. Smirnova. The Russian version of the text is more politically correct, using the acronym RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, the official Soviet name for what is now the Russian Federation).

3 *Ottepel* (*The Thaw*) is the title of a novel by Ilya Ehrenburg published in 1954, the year after Stalin’s death. The word now signifies the years of de-Stalinisation until Communist Party Secretary Nikita Khrushchev was deposed in 1964.

4 Viktor Popkov (1932–74), the painter of, for example, *Stroiteli Bratskoy GES* (*The Builders of Bratsk*, 1962), developed into something of a magical realist towards the end of the 1960s. The Azerbaijani painter Tair Salakhov (b.1928), known for his elegant portrait of the composer Dmitry Shostakovich (1976), often depicted oil industry workers.



Gely Korzhev, *Egorka letun* (*Egorka the Flyer*), 1976–80, oil on canvas, 200 × 224cm. Courtesy State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

years of World War II in rural Bashkiria, where they were evacuated by the regime to save ‘a generation of painters’.⁵ As a mature artist, he was handsomely rewarded for his expert skills with a studio in central Moscow, multiple honours, foreign travel and influential political posts. In November 1968, less than half a year after the invasion of Czechoslovakia, Korzhev was elected president of the Artists’ Union of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) in recognition of what is still considered his most successful series of paintings, *Opalennye ognem voyny* (*Burned by the Fire of War*, 1964–68). In 1979 he was given the honorary title National Artist of the USSR.

Like many of his compatriots, Korzhev reacted to the disappearance of this system, acknowledged as important even by those who questioned its legitimacy, with a great deal of bitterness. Its end didn’t stop him from continuing to paint the kind of pictures he wanted to paint, which now included Biblical scenes and dystopian tableaux populated by *tyurliki*, the grotesque cartoonish characters he said he invented to entertain his grandson. He must have believed in this work, made in angry and reclusive opposition to post-Soviet life, even if those who knew him have described him as a non-believer. While Korzhev’s iconic canvases from the 1950s, 60s and 70s were collected by the most important Soviet museums (first among them the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and the State Russian Museum in Leningrad), much work from his prolific period in the 1990s and the 2000s is in private collections in Russia and the US.

Above, I quoted the wall text for the 2016 Korzhev retrospective at Tretyakov Gallery at some length because it inspired inquisitiveness in me as a museum curator and critical observer. Why does it, and the other pieces of writing produced for the occasion,

5 A. Kotlyar, ‘Gely Korzhev: “Vse vo imya pravdy”’. Intervyu s V.M. Sidorovym’ (‘Gely Korzhev: “All in the Name of Truth”’, Interview with Valentin Sidorov’), in *Gely Korzhev* (exh. cat.), Moscow: State Tretyakov Gallery, 2016, p.245. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the Russian are the author’s.



sound like cultural policy in the making rather than authoritative art historical commentary? Why venture so close to the thin line that separates the hyperactive from the hyperbolic? Why that streak of political revisionism, particularly in the official English translation that blurs any distinction between Russia today and half a century ago?

It is not that the Tretyakov's relatively new general director, Zemfira Tregulova, who previously ran the State Museum and Exhibition Centre ROSIZO (more about them in a moment), is to be questioned for her programming competence. Quite the opposite, she generated legendary queues for last autumn's survey exhibition of the pre-revolutionary portrait painter Valentin Serov. In her short preface to the Korzhev catalogue, Tregulova writes that the museum had conceived his retrospective long ago, but 'repeated attempts at collaboration led to no result: in the 1990s and the early 2000s Korzhev was not inclined to work with governmental organisations'. And further: 'Now, when there is renewed interest in figurative art, it has become possible to look at Korzhev's well-known works in new ways and to sense the organic affiliation between his creation and that of his illustrious contemporaries, for instance Lucian Freud.'⁶

In today's uneasy Russia, critics tend to praise Korzhev, and others like him, for his sensitivity to changes in the political climate (the wintry metaphors used to describe them are hardly accidental) while at the same time maintaining that he was no 'turncoat artist', or *konyunktturnyi khudozhnik* – an interesting term that explicitly references an economic and political 'outlook' (*konyunktura*) and thus personal gain.⁷ Any political or economic system requires a certain degree of adaptability from artists. Taking prevailing reality into account is not in itself bad. Yet only those who also project a set of personal convictions onto their work will achieve true greatness. Such balancing acts are never straightforward, and certainly

Gely Korzhev,
Mutantny (tyurliki)
(*The Mutants*
(*tyurliki*)), 1980–92,
oil on canvas, 206 ×
251.5cm. Courtesy
private collection

⁶ Zemfira Tregulova, untitled preface to *Gely Korzhev, op. cit.*, p.6.

⁷ See, for instance, Ekaterina Allenova and Valentin Dyakonov's conversation about the retrospective in *Artgid*: '[Dyakonov:] This is just Korzhev's response to the demands of his time. The Party line swayed back and forth, and he followed it organically. [Allenova:] [Ilya] Repin, by the way, was the same. Just like Korzhev, he was no *konyunktturnyi khudozhnik*; he just felt in the air "what was necessary now".' E. Allenova and V. Dyakonov, 'Gely: Beseda na retrospektive' ('Gely: Conversation in the Retrospective'), *Artgid* [online journal], 4 April 2016, available at <http://artguide.com/posts/1009?page=5> (last accessed on 15 August 2016).

have not been for Russian artists seeking fulfilment as makers of images that appeal to both the People and Those in Power. So it does make sense to compare Gely Korzhev to Ilya Repin (1844–1930), a great painter under the last three Czars, who simply moved from Petrograd to his summer house, newly on the Finnish side of the border, to escape revolution and civil war. Repin authored majestic group portraits such as *Yubileynoe zasedanie Gosudarstvennogo soveta* (*Ceremonial Sitting of the State Council*, 1903) but is mostly remembered, unlike Korzhev, for his ‘dissident’ socially engaged canvases, among them *Burlaki na Volge* (*Bargemen on the Volga*, 1870–73) and *Ne zhdali* (*Unexpected Return*, 1884).

If we really want to understand why the Tretyakov Gallery put on the Korzhev retrospective at this particular time, we must move beyond contextual explanation and take a closer look at the actual pictures that appeared on its walls. But we must also look at why ‘pictures’, and more specifically ‘thematic pictures’ (*tematicheskie kartiny*), were so fundamentally important in the context that made Korzhev a successful painter, and why this way of thinking and speaking about painted images still matters in Russia.

The Real Honesty of an Artist

The artist may serve:

1. Material wealth;
2. Himself;
3. Those in power;
4. Art;
5. The People

(the latter being the most difficult thing). There are thousands of combinations of these intentions and they occur in the most curious forms, but it is only by following one of them that you can achieve results. Being goal-oriented on your chosen path will, in some cases, come across as honesty. In other cases it will constitute the real honesty of an artist.

– Gely Korzhev⁸

Russia today is not associated with any coherent ideology, unless the conviction that everything is ‘political technology’ (*polittekhlogiya*, the post-Soviet mutation of ‘spin’) should be considered ideological by default. It might be possible to argue that the current regime’s preference for cynical manipulation over all other approaches to life betrays a belief in the corruptibility of human nature that is, in the end, a bit naïve. Many examples could be given of Russia’s ‘hybrid wars’, none the less troublesome for being fought from a position of relative weakness, but they would lead us astray here. It is no consolation, but ultimately all Russian rulers have feared their own subjects more than the rest of the world has feared Russia.

Were the people of Russia less cynical and more content forty or fifty years ago, when they were ruled by an almighty Party demanding the display of commitment to incontestable values – a bright egalitarian future, scientific knowledge, absolute truth? This remains an open question. The nostalgia for the USSR that is so palpable today – some of it manufactured by political technologists, some of it a response to abusive social change – is not a reliable guide to the past. Russians retroactively value the abstract good of being the custodians of superpower, but back in the day they were too isolated from the rest of the world to enjoy, or perhaps even fully grasp, their supremacy.

Besides, as Korzhev’s undated note indicates, the feel-good effects of ideological consciousness came at a price. Vigilance and self-critique were expected of the upper echelons in Soviet society, not least the ‘creative intelligentsia’, defined as an in-between layer (*prosloyka*) of Soviet society rather than a class (formally there were only two classes: workers and peasants). Unemployment was illegal in the USSR, and the only way for someone with creative ambitions to escape salaried work was to be cleared for membership in one of the official cultural workers’ unions. If you weren’t loyal enough, the privileges of belonging to this new aristocracy could be revoked. This famously happened to Boris Pasternak after he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1958.

⁸ Artist’s statement, quoted in *Gely Korzhev, op. cit.*, p.259.



Did Korzhev really believe that he spoke on behalf of the People? His statement guides us towards this conclusion. We may guess that he penned it sometime after being honoured (and presumably also burdened) with senior political positions in the Soviet art world, around the time of *Egorka the Flyer* perhaps. By then he identified with a powerful segment of officialdom that favoured the traditions and interests of one particular people, the Russian majority population of the RSFSR, over the modernising internationalist ambitions embodied by the USSR as a whole. Another painting, *Beseda (Conversation, 1980–85)*, illustrates this opposition: Korzhev let his visual theatrics run at full throttle and turned out a rather over-determined piece about vision and guidance. Two personifications of the People bask in the light of Truth.⁹ The blind leading the blinded – or is it the other way round? As a painting, it doesn't quite work. Its sculptural qualities are just a little bit overstated. If *Egorka the Flyer* somehow takes off, *Conversation* falls flat. Korzhev's Lenin is not forceful enough, and his towering Russian Homer (an idealised self-portrait) remains mute under a crust of mimetically applied oil paint that mummifies the image.

He wasn't always this heavy-handed. One of his first mature canvases is *V dni voyny (In the Days of War, 1954)*. To show the young wartime artist facing an empty canvas was to suggest that he might not have thought of painting a portrait of Stalin (which a first version of this painting showed him doing). It was a daring move at the time, and it secured a fair amount of attention for Korzhev at the first exhibition that the Soviet Artists' Union organised after Stalin's death, in January 1955. He was thoroughly prepared, both technically and ideologically, for the breakthrough, which he followed up with the award-winning¹⁰ and much reproduced triptych *Kommunisty (Communists, 1957–60)* and the perhaps more convincing painting *Vlyublennye (In Love, 1959)*. While the well-rehearsed immediacy of *In the Days of War* is distilled from the best multi-figure tableaux of late-Stalinist painting, always staged as if for triumphal celebration whatever the topic, this is a picture for a new and less exuberant age. It is monumental in composition, striking an elegiac note without

Gely Korzhev,
Beseda (Conversation),
1980–85, oil on
canvas, 150 × 200cm.
© State Russian
Museum,
St Petersburg

9 As a not very subtle clue, the masthead of *Pravda*, or 'Truth', the newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, is peeping out of Lenin's jacket.

10 The triptych was awarded the Gold Medal of the Artists' Union of the USSR in 1961 and the State Prize of the RSFSR in 1966.



Gely Korzhev, *Vlyublennyye (In Love)*, 1959, oil on canvas, 156 × 207cm. © State Russian Museum, St Petersburg

privileging the personal over the social. Korzhev's parents posed as the two protagonists who, at the end of the working day, escape by motorcycle to a stony, stormy beach that no one else seems to be visiting. They are characters hardened by labour under an unforgiving sun. The title indicates that they were brought together late in life by shared experiences of war and loss, but the scene is choreographed to be future-oriented, not nostalgic: the woman looks towards the horizon, the man looks straight ahead, the motorcycle stands by to move them forward.

How honest is Korzhev's counter-intuitive illustration of hope? Is 'honesty' even a reasonable criterion for judging figurative painting? In his work from the late 1950s and early-to-mid-1960s, there are indeed, as the wall text in the Tretyakov Gallery claimed, echoes of neorealist cinema and monumental art, but they are translated into a two-tier visual system that *In Love* begins to demonstrate. It is as if the thinking is lens-based, or wall-based, while the execution is manifestly not. In the retrospective there were plenty of oil sketches from life, of bodies and objects, but no photographic studies. In the catalogue, the only photographs are family snapshots and pictures of Korzhev performing official duties. His images are always artisanal and definable as 'easel pictures' (*stankovye kartiny*): paintings of the kind that used to be bought and sold by bourgeois collectors but now offered edification and aesthetic enjoyment to a proletarian public. This 'easel' category is a rather confusing aspect of Soviet art writing and museology, but we should bear in mind Boris Groys's clarifying remark: 'Under the conditions of modernity an artwork can be produced and brought to the public in two ways: as a commodity or as a tool of political propaganda.'¹¹ Although easel paintings continued to be made and exhibited under Stalin and Khrushchev – along with 'easel sculptures', 'easel prints' and even 'easel photographs' – they were clearly not seen as commodities at the time.

As we have already observed, in Korzhev's mature work the paint sometimes becomes disconnected from the inner logic of the image and sticks to the surface like dead skin. With this reservation in mind, I agree with the organisers of the recent retrospective: *Burned by the Fire of War* should be considered Korzhev's finest achievement as a painter and image-

11 Boris Groys, *Art Power*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2008, p.4.



maker. In the six instalments of the series there are many examples of photographic cropping to block out unnecessary details or context. Much of the narrative power is borrowed from audio-visual representations of the ‘Great Patriotic War’, the official term for those aspects of World War II that could be remembered and talked about in the USSR.¹² War movies were the staple of the Soviet film industry from the end of the war right up until the end of the union. Applying paint onto rather large and almost square canvases, Korzhev managed to rethink and revitalise the monumental in ways only rarely seen in cinema.¹³ Repeatedly his parents posed for him; we recognise them in *Mat’* (*Mother*, 1964–67) and *Starye rany* (*Old Wounds*, 1967). Had we come across them in mural paintings or mosaics, we might have felt crushed by their larger-than-life presence, depicted with an almost naturalistic sensitivity to anatomical detail. As easel pictures they are monumental without being threatening, just as such figures projected onto the silver screen would be accepted as a credible fiction despite being grotesquely oversized.

Korzhev would never allow himself to become more than *almost* naturalistic, because naturalism was known as a nineteenth-century bourgeois style contrary to Socialist Realism. It is debatable to what extent Stalinist dogma on painting was still alive in the early 1960s, after the severe style had begun to blur the distinction between thematic pictures and the lesser ‘easel’ genres of landscape, portrait or still life. (We notice how the hierarchies established by the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture under Louis XIV were

Gely Korzhev, *Mat’* (*Mother*), 1964–67, oil on canvas, 200 × 223cm. Courtesy State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

12 This covers everything that happened after Germany attacked the USSR on 21 June 1941 but none of the things that the USSR did in 1939–41 under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (the invasions of Poland, Finland, Romania and the Baltic States).

13 When it does occur, as in Alexey German’s film *Dvadsat’ dney bez voyny* (*Twenty Days Without War*, 1976), it is because the director dares to focus on ‘smaller’ but especially meaningful aspects of a complex chain of events.

revived 300 years later by Socialist Realism, but with thematic pictures replacing history painting and allegory.) Yet in 1962 a warning bell was sounded to artists who, like Korzhev, wished to continue adapting the system to their own aesthetic needs without risking serious transgression. Khrushchev responded with an explosion of expletives to the exhibition celebrating the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Moscow Artists' Union, an event usually seen as the official end of pluralism in Soviet art. Where the f*** were the true thematic pictures? What the h*** had happened to real easel painting?

For the rest of his long painting career, Korzhev never strayed from these formats. I would argue that all his works are easel pictures, not just in a technical sense. As vehicles for raising awareness in the 'softer' years of the USSR, from the mid-1950s to the late 1980s, an era of steadily decreasing social mobility, they are meant to address the individual white-collar, city-dwelling viewer rather than the collective consciousness of farmers or factory workers. Therefore, Korzhev's seductive talk of 'the People' feels like an abstraction. To be sure, the works he thought of as important are always thematic (i.e. ideological) pictures, and his descents into the genres of still life and (self-)portraiture are conceptualised as diversions or as preparations for his treatment of literary, religious or political themes. I have already mentioned the *tyurliki*, but there is also the *Don Quixote* series (c.1977-98) and the Socialist Realist reinterpretations of Biblical motifs, begun towards the end of the Gorbachev era. Let's just note that *Otets i syn* (*Father and Son*, 1990) may very well be compared to *Conversation*, but also to all those other figures throughout Korzhev's oeuvre that were based on the physiognomy of his own father, who died in 1986.

Why Am I Not a Modernist?

Yes, 'contemporary art' is more philosophy than art. It is a philosophy that expresses the dominance of strength and fact over clear thinking and poetic contemplation. The brutal destruction of real forms signals an onset of blind ill will. This is the revenge of the slave, as he supposedly casts off the yoke of necessity and simply relaxes. If it were only relaxation! There is a fatal connection between slave-style protest and oppression itself. According to all the newest aesthetics, art acts hypnotically; it traumatises or, on the contrary, dulls and soothes a consciousness bereft of its own life. In brief, this is the art of a crowd, mobilised by the powers of suggestion to run after Caesar's chariot. Faced with such a programme, I vote for the most mediocre, most epigonic academism – it is the lesser evil. But of course, my ideal is another, as the reader will have guessed.

– Mikhail Lifshitz, 'Why Am I Not a Modernist?'¹⁴

Intellectual polemic founded on moral conviction has become rare. I write in the summer of 2016, when postmodern relativism is being run into the ground by one of the candidates in the US presidential elections. At this time it is refreshing to read a vintage argument against the disruptive effects of modernism on the twentieth-century mind. If we had to imagine a position mirroring (i.e. both inverting and reflecting) Theodor Adorno's loyalty to advanced modernist art as the 'societal antithesis to society, not to be immediately deduced from it',¹⁵ it could well be the text quoted just above, whose author is little known in the English-speaking world.

The clear thinking of Mikhail Lifshitz (1905–83), once the USSR's leading expert on Marxist aesthetics and an outspoken art and literary critic, was backed up by his long experience of fighting for the Soviet cause, both as an academic and in frontline service during World War II. In the early 1930s, in Moscow, he worked at the Institute of Marx, Engels and Lenin alongside his friend György Lukács, the renowned Hungarian Marxist theoretician, who later testified to having been deeply influenced by Lifshitz. Being Jewish, Lifshitz narrowly escaped execution by the German invaders, and also suffered discrimination during Stalin's dog-whistle campaign against 'cosmopolitanism' in the late 1940s. For a wider readership, he became a household name through his dangerously witty critique of the celebrated writer Marietta Shaginyan, printed in 1954, too soon after Stalin's death.¹⁶

14 Mikhail Lifshitz, 'Pochemy ya ne modernist?' (1963), in M. Lifshitz and Lidiya Reinhardt, *Krizis bezobraziya. Ot kubizma k pop-art* (*The Crisis of Ugliness: From Cubism to Pop Art*), Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1968, p.197.

15 Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970, p.19. Translation the author's.

‘Why Am I Not a Modernist?’ first appeared in Czech in 1963, the year after Khrushchev’s outburst in the Manege exhibition hall in Moscow, which ushered in an official campaign against abstract art. The book that featured the Russian version of this pamphlet was published in the momentous year of 1968, and caused even greater controversy than Lifshitz’s earlier attack on sloppy Socialist Realism in literature. This time he was targeted by members of the unofficial opposition amongst the intelligentsia, the ‘dissidents’, for being anti-modernist. The book’s title, *Krizis bezobrazhiya*, translates as ‘The Crisis of Ugliness’, but *bezobrazie* could also mean ‘outrage’ or, literally, ‘formlessness’. Subtitled ‘From Cubism to Pop Art’ and offering tendentious but well-informed refutations of these and other movements in Western art, Lifshitz’s book influenced several generations of Soviet artists and art historians, although perhaps not in the way he had wished. Its black-and-white illustrations include a photograph of Jackson Pollock working in his studio and reproductions of Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917) and Andy Warhol’s *100 Cans* (1962). Most Soviet readers were seeing these images for the first time. Many chose to be inspired by them.

But what is the connection between Lifshitz and Korzhev, other than the obvious fact that neither of them identified as modernists? I’m trying to answer why the latter’s oeuvre is now being repackaged and resold to Russian audiences. Although these two men were of different generations and professions, they could hardly have been unaware of each other.

Korzhev managed to inhabit diametrically opposite characters at the same time: the career art politician and the autonomous artist, the official mouthpiece and the undercover dissident.

No art world is that big. We may see the relation between them as one of contrast. While Korzhev philosophised about ‘serving the People’, Lifshitz wrote that ‘a communist has no need for a crowd blinded by myth. He needs a people consisting of conscious individuals.’¹⁷ Lifshitz penned passionate denunciations of modernism because he saw it as a corrupting agent paving the way for violent fascism; as the publisher of Karl Marx’s and Friedrich Engels’s writings on aesthetics in Russian translation, he had unique knowledge of the prehistory of

Socialist Realism. He defended it eloquently, if only as a lesser evil. For this uncompromising consistency – rare in the Soviet period and in Russia today – Lifshitz is now being revived and republished by players on the Moscow art scene, notably the artist Dmitry Gutov and the writer and curator David Riff.¹⁸

Korzhev, meanwhile, knew the operative definitions of Socialist Realism from his own practice of art and mainstream politics (he was repeatedly elected a member of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR), but when asked by students to specify its meaning, he replied, according to his own notes: ‘The political term “socialist” doesn’t fit with the term “realism”, which functions in the area of culture. For myself I have defined the term “social realism”, which means human life in all its complication.’¹⁹ A video interview with Korzhev that accompanied the retrospective shows him using almost the same words – not exactly a ringing endorsement of the ideology he was tasked with promoting and policing as president of the Artists’ Union of the RSFSR. And surely, Korzhev knew that the distinction between ‘socialist’ and ‘social’ realism could be a question of life and death in the years that followed the establishment of monopolistic official unions for artists, writers and other creative professionals, at the end of the First Five-Year Plan of 1928–32.

It has become a standard art historical narrative to claim that, on 23 April 1932, the government’s decree ‘On the Reconstruction of the Writers’ and Artists’ Organisations’ signalled the end of free expression in the USSR, suppressing the utopian energies of post-revolutionary art and art education so successfully that Kazimir Malevich and other avant-garde artists no longer dared to make abstract images. Fifteen years after the revolu-

16 M. Lifshitz, ‘Dnevnik Marietty Shaginyan’ (‘Marietta Shaginyan’s Diary’), *Novyy Mir*, no.2, 1954; reprinted in V. Arslanov (ed.), *Mikhail Lifshitz: Liberalizm i demokratiya: filosofskyye pamflety* (Mikhail Lifshitz: Liberalism and Democracy: Philosophical Pamphlets), Moscow: Iskustvo-XXI vek, 2007, pp.83–140.

17 M. Lifshitz, ‘Pochemy ya ne modernist?’, *op. cit.*, p.199.

18 See, for instance, the script for Dmitry Gutov’s video *Lifshitz Institute* (2004–05), available at http://www.gutov.ru/video/lifshitz_inst_eng.htm; and David Riff’s English translation of ‘Pochemy ya ne modernist?’ (‘Why Am I Not a Modernist?’), available at <https://soundcloud.com/david-riff-1/lifshitz-why-i-am-not-a-modernist> (both last accessed on 15 August 2016).

19 Artist’s statement, quoted in *Gely Korzhev*, *op. cit.*, p.269.



Gely Korzhev, *Starye rany* (*Old Wounds*), 1967, oil on canvas, 200 × 209cm. © State Russian Museum, St Petersburg

tion, Russia reverted to nineteenth-century visions of classical art as a didactic tool. This version of events is not untrue, but there are nuances and contradictions that have been elaborated by experts like the critic and curator Ekaterina Degot. In the catalogue for her 2005 exhibition of early Soviet Socialist Realism at the Museum of Walloon Art in Liège, Belgium, she sketches the evolution of leftist Soviet art in the 1920s and early 1930s: from ‘constructivism’ and ‘productionism’ via ‘projectionism’ and ‘concretism’ to a realism that finally became codified as ‘socialist’ after being qualified by adjectives such as ‘monumental’, ‘collective’, ‘thematic’ and ‘ideological’. The core shift, she writes, was that ‘realism needed to replace futurism, because after the revolution of 1917 the future became reality. In practice, “realism” came to signify Soviet “contemporaneity”, *modernity*; to be a “realist” was – at least in the 1920s and 30s – “to belong to one’s own time”, and not at all to be continuing a tradition.’²⁰ Many Soviet artists – including Malevich, Degot argues – shared this worldview.

Almost everything changed after those years of relatively pluralist politics, with the forced collectivisation of Soviet agriculture in the early 1930s, the Great Terror of 1937–38 (Stalin’s full-scale purges of non-Russian nationalities, the Communist Party apparatus and other targeted groups who never thought of themselves as disloyal to the Soviet project), World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. The idealistic, radical phase of Socialist Realism was long over by the time Korzhev graduated, in 1950, from the Surikov State

20 Ekaterina Degot, ‘Idealisticheskiy realizm: eshche odin russkiy avangard’ (‘Idealist Realism: Yet Another Russian Avant-Garde’), in *Sovetskiy idealizm: zhivopis’ i kino 1925–1939* (*Soviet Idealism: Painting and Cinema 1925–1939*) (exh. cat), Brussels, Liège and Moscow: Europalia Russia, Fonds Mercator, Musée de l’Art Wallon and ROSIZO, 2005, p.14.

Institute of Art in Moscow. We have seen some of his subsequent contributions to the official art of post-Stalinist Russia. They were significant because he had the capacity to synthesise ‘what was necessary now’ into images that unfroze the official canon from the inside, not least by reactivating the link between painted and cinematic images that was so important to Socialist Realism in its early years. He also seems to have found an acceptable formula for visualising the mixed feelings of superiority and self-sacrifice in the ethnic Russian majority population. His peasant or proletarian heroes – they can be either persons or objects, since a still life is also political – are less jarringly chauvinistic than those painted by his contemporaries Valentin Sidorov or Ilya Glazunov, but they still get the message across that ‘the People’ means ‘the Russian People’.

Lifshitz declined to tell us exactly what art he favoured, but as editor of the journal *Literaturnyi kritik* (*The Literary Critic*) in the 1930s, he worked closely with Andrei Platonov (1899–1951), a writer who is now considered the most significant voice of de facto modernism in Russian literature at the time when realism was the new futurism. A journalist by training and a committed communist, Platonov turned the new language of post-revolutionary consciousness against itself in novels such as *Kotlovan* (*The Foundation Pit*, finished in 1930 but not published in the USSR until 1987), about the construction of a grand new ‘general’ edifice that never quite takes off. After *Literaturnyi kritik* was banned in 1940, Platonov could no longer publish, and his work was rehabilitated only in the 1980s. Lifshitz’s tastes were, in other words, rather more subversive than he let on in *Krizis bezobraziya*.

One of Korzhev’s favourite writers was Valentin Rasputin (1937–2015), a representative of the ‘village prose’ movement in post-Stalinist literature comparable to the severe style in painting.²¹ Rasputin, a social and environmental activist as well as a widely read novelist, was awarded the USSR State Prize in 1977 and the Order of Merit to the Motherland (by President Vladimir Putin) in 2002.

Always Contemporary

The pictures in this exhibition represent different stylistic movements and were painted during different periods in our country’s history, yet not only do they not contradict each other, on the contrary they enter into ‘dialogue’: works from our time continue the artistic traditions of previous generations.

– ROSIZO Gallery, Moscow²²

It is clear that the Tretyakov Gallery’s decision to do a Korzhev retrospective in 2016 was prompted by both aesthetic and political deliberations. It couldn’t be otherwise. His art rhymes with a nostalgic nationalist agenda that wishes to maintain a certain level of deniability. It wouldn’t have worked had the artist not been worthy of attention and admiration in his own right, as an unapologetically painterly painter, but another precondition was the openness to contradictory interpretations – another form of deniability – that he built into his oeuvre. We have seen how Korzhev managed to inhabit diametrically opposite characters at the same time: the career art politician and the autonomous artist, the official mouthpiece and the undercover dissident. It should be said that the exhibition and the catalogue were both competently designed, with an understanding for how a state-run museum should go about the business of ‘internationalising’ artists who have mostly worked for a domestic audience. The Tretyakov Gallery took this task seriously and delivered a project that boosted Korzhev’s posthumous reputation without being hagiographic.

In the end, the best way to evaluate the retrospective may be to compare it with a concurrent exhibition in Moscow. ‘Vsegda sovremennoe. Iskusstvo XX i XXI vekov’ (‘Always Contemporary: Art of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries’) was the first event organised by the new ROSIZO Gallery, in what used to be Uzbekistan’s pavilion at the VDNKH, the All-Union Exhibition of Achievements in the National Economy – a fun-fair-like Stalinist public park in the northern part of central Moscow that also hosted the Sixth Moscow Biennial last year. ROSIZO was founded in 1959 to manage museum collections and public monuments for the Ministry of Culture of the RSFSR, and its name is a shortened

²¹ See Gely Korzhev, *op. cit.*, p.244.

²² I. Duksina, ‘O vystavke’ (‘About the Exhibition’), preface to *Vsegda sovremennoe. Iskusstvo XX i XXI vekov* (*Always Contemporary: Art of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*) (exh. cat.), Moscow: ROSIZO Gallery, 2016, p.6.

version of an acronym that means ‘Russian Visual Art Propaganda’. Until recently, it was a quite anonymous institution, known mostly for its exhibitions abroad and for handling large amounts of state-owned artworks at home. Yet this spring headlines were made even outside of Russia when the National Centre for Contemporary Art (NCCA), a respected organisation founded in 1992 and with eight regional branches throughout the Russian Federation, was suddenly dismantled and incorporated into ROSIZO. This happened after the NCCA nominated *Ugroza* (*Threat*, 2015) by the always-subversive performance artist Pyotr Pavlensky – for which he set the door of the Federal Security Service on fire with the intention of being prosecuted for terrorism – in the ‘best art project’ category of its yearly Innovation Prize. That whole category was then suspended after members of the external experts’ committee wanted to shortlist Pavlensky.

The merger was noteworthy not just for the circumstances and the speed with which it was effectuated, but for the professional biography of the new entity’s director: ‘The man appointed to ROSIZO [in 2014] was Sergey Perov, an engineer who graduated from the Alma-Ata Military Academy with a degree in tank and car maintenance. He worked in the Komsomol [Communist Youth Organisation] and in private business, managed branches of [the ruling political party] United Russia (2008–10), transferred to the Presidential Administration (2010–12), thereafter became Director of the Department of Culture of the Russian Federal Government (2012–13) and thereafter Vice President of the Government of the Moscow Province (2013–14).’²³ Few things cause such concern in the arts community of any European country as a well-connected civil servant (or, for that matter, entrepreneur) who directs a major cultural institution while professing neutrality about the ‘content’ of its operations. This, the thinking goes, is just one step away from indifference or ignorance or something even more dangerous. It is true that tribalism may distort the art world’s view of society at large and that some of our best ministers of culture (or city councillors responsible for the arts) have honed their political skills in environments outside the hierarchies of high culture, but there is, in a democracy, a difference between elected politicians and appointed managers. It is hard to overestimate the threat posed by ‘managerialism’ to the fragile ecology of public institutions specialising in contemporary art.

Before assimilating the NCCA and opening the space at VDNKH, Perov’s ROSIZO released a line of iPhone covers with portraits of Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev and, in collaboration with the Russian postal service, launched the project ‘Mesta vstrechi s iskusstvom’ (‘Meeting Places for Art’), which dispatched framed reproductions of masterpieces in their collection to locals museums throughout the eleven time zones of the Federation.²⁴ Fair enough (although the use of Stalin’s face is always suspicious), but the new super-institution will be evaluated by its performance on the stages it chooses for itself. And ‘Always Contemporary’ failed the test. The artworks crammed into its three sections – ‘Avant-Garde and Socialist Realism’, ‘From the 1960s to the 1980s’ and ‘Postmodernism’ – were a jumble of the great-but-out-of-place, the good-but-not-great, the so-bad-it’s-good and the downright awful, all of it hung, in the time-honoured Russian fashion, too high on the wall.

In ROSIZO’s freshly renovated, climate-controlled and dramatically lit exhibition halls, Konstantin Vyalov’s *Gornaya doroga* (*Mountain Road*, 1934), a very delicate early flower of Socialist Realism, had to fight for attention with a pedestrian Suprematist composition by Ivan Klyun, while Marat Samsonov’s inadvertently hilarious *NS Khrushchev i F Kastro v beryozovoy roshche* (*Nikita Khrushchev and Fidel Castro in a Birch Grove*, 1963–64) met some of Gutov’s metal sculptures with luxury handbags and other contemporary use-objects from the series *B/u* (*Used*, 2000). I could go on, but there is no need. The noisily broadcast ideology of ‘Always Contemporary’ was that the avant-garde and Socialist Realism belong together in the same room from now on, and that management of resources for presentation and publicity trumps both enjoyment and judgment, not to mention scholarship. The Tretyakov Gallery, with its superior collection and art-specific approach to programming, scores infinitely higher for professionalism, but even there critical observers must look out for the too self-congratulatory.

I can’t help wondering what Mikhail Lifshitz, the master polemicist, would have had to say about all this. Including, of course, the Gely Korzhev retrospective.

23 Lyudmila Lunina, ‘Slili pod koren’ (‘Merged under the Root’), *Kommersant*, 6 June 2016, available at <http://kommersant.ru/doc/3000586> (last accessed on 15 August).

24 See *ibid*.



Ilya Kabakov, *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment*, undated concept drawing, watercolour, felt pen, lead pencil, chalk and correction fluid, 34 × 23cm. Courtesy the artist and Wolfgang Roth & Partners Fine Art

The Kabakov Effect: ‘Moscow Conceptualism’ in the History of Contemporary Art

– Peter Osborne

... starting in the late 1960s ... [the Moscow conceptual] circle of artists became an engine in the development of aesthetic and conceptual models that, while reflecting on local issues, also fit successfully into the discourses that were being developed by their contemporaries in the West. Indeed, it can be claimed that the 1970s and 1980s were the last era when a channelling of local contexts into an international language was effectively realised, just as in the period of the historical avant-garde.

– Margarita Tupitsyn¹

The term ‘Moscow’ is heavy enough to outweigh any Western term like ‘futurism’ or ‘conceptualism’.

– Boris Groys²

These two statements raise a series of interesting historical and methodological issues about the emergent discourses of a global art history and of histories of contemporary art in particular. Taken together, they highlight the tension internal to the phrase ‘Moscow Conceptualism’, in which a Western category (‘conceptualism’) is conjugated with a purportedly Eastern name (‘Moscow’) in order that the latter may be raised to the power of an established ‘international’ art discourse, whilst at the same time expanding and re-inflecting that discourse towards a

Peter Osborne tracks the trajectory of ‘Moscow Conceptualism’ against contemporary art’s historical contradictions.

more geo-politically comprehensive set of artistic practices.³ The history of conceptual art has been at the forefront of this kind of revisionist historiography, and ‘conceptualism’ has been the main category through which its unity has been sought.⁴ Within this

field, though, Margarita Tupitsyn and Boris Groys offer conflicting standpoints.

Tupitsyn takes the aesthetic and conceptual models developed by the Moscow conceptual circle to ‘fit successfully’ into the Western discourses of conceptual art by some kind of pre-established historical harmony. While Groys considers the designation ‘Moscow’ to be sufficiently singular to ‘outweigh’ any term of Western art history. It is thus by virtue of its differential singularity (rather than its discursive fit), for Groys, that twentieth-century Russian art is to become part of an international art history. This is the internationalism of an aggregative unity of self-contained art nations, rather than that of either an expansionary Western discourse or a received Soviet one (with Marxism-Leninism as the language of a Communist International, of communism as internationalism).

What neither Tupitsyn nor Groys considers is the possibility that ‘Moscow Conceptualism’ might re-inflect (or might already have re-inflected) the Western discourse of conceptual art to the point of its critical transformation. This is the interesting possibility: the critical transformation of the discourses of conceptual art by the term ‘Moscow’; a critical transformation that is at the same time a key mediating moment in the constitution of the category of contemporary art as a postconceptual art.⁵ It is here that the original terms of Groys’s invention of ‘Moscow

1 Margarita Tupitsyn, curatorial statement for the Russian pavilion of the 56th edition of the Venice Biennale (2015), in M. Tupitsyn (ed.), *Irina Nakhova: The Green Pavilion*, Moscow: Stella Art Foundation, 2015, p.35. By ‘the period of the historical avant-garde’, we may take Tupitsyn to mean the period from the outbreak of the First World War to the rise of fascism in Germany and of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, that is, 1914–33. For the concept of the ‘historical’ (as opposed to the ‘neo-’) avant-garde, see Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974, trans. Michael Shaw), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

2 Boris Groys, ‘Introduction’, *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010, p.7.

3 The idea that Moscow is an ‘Eastern’ name is, of course, a distinctively Western one. Within Russia itself it has for a long time stood for a certain ‘Westernising’ imaginary.

4 See, in particular, Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss (ed.), *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* (exh. cat.), New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999; and L. Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007. For an alternative attempt at a historically based, internal expansion of the notion of ‘conceptual art’ itself, see Peter Osborne, ‘Survey’, in P. Osborne (ed.), *Conceptual Art*, London: Phaidon, 2002, pp.14–51.

Conceptualism' become germane. For the subsequently suppressed, conceptually differentiating, middle term in Groys's initial analysis was, of course, 'romantic' – 'Moscow Romantic Conceptualism' in the title of his now well-known essay of 1979, published simultaneously in Russian and English, in France.⁶ Retrospectively, with its dual columns and passport-type photograph of its author, this essay itself appears as something of a conceptual piece, effecting a certain auto-fictionalisation of Groys as a character in his own story. Writing this story, Groys

The fictionalisation of the Soviet erases the hinge between history and fiction, leaving Soviet history engulfed by Western art.

recounts, he 'used the word "Romantic" precisely to indicate the difference between Anglo-American conceptual art and Moscow art practices'.⁷ At that time, Conceptual art was associated with a relatively narrow canon of mainly New York-based artists, and the critical literature was dominated by the 'analytical' self-understandings of those artists, rooted in mathematical and linguistic

analysis: Sol LeWitt, Joseph Kosuth and the British group Art & Language in particular.⁸ So the term 'Romantic' – used by Groys for 'a combination of dispassionate cultural analysis with a Romantic dream of the true culture' – had a radically differentiating effect.⁹ During the 1980s, however, the qualifying term was soon discarded; 'Moscow Conceptualism' came to be adopted as a primarily geo-political label encompassing a larger group of artists in Moscow than the more strictly 'Romantic' ones – while aspects of the stricter artistic characterisation in fact apply equally to artists from Leningrad and Odessa, who may have passed through Moscow but whose practices derived from elsewhere.

The weight of the term 'Moscow' in Groys's analysis turned out to be heavy enough to outweigh – or at the least, to incorporate – the term 'Romantic' too. Happy Moscow.¹⁰ This weight is not just the weight of the city as a metonym for the country of which it is the magnetic capital, itself metonymic for the empire; ultimately it is the weight of the term 'history' itself. 'Through the art of Moscow conceptualism', Groys writes, 'a certain period of modern history – namely, the history of realisation of the communist project – finally becomes form.'¹¹ Following Groys, 'Moscow Conceptualism' thus became a metonym for the artistic expression of everyday life in the Soviet Union. It thereby became a relay connecting the specific body of (Russian) work to which it originally referred to a far wider body of Eastern European art, the framework for the unity of which it thereby provided: everyday life under Soviet communism.¹²

At the same time, it was the 'conceptualist' component of the phrase that allowed for the integration of that broader body of work into what Tupitsyn calls the 'international language' of 'the discourses that were being developed in the West': that is, the emergent genre of what is now known as the 'history of contemporary art'. There are thus two distinct kinds of 'international language' at play here: the language of Marxism-Leninism, of communism as an internationalism – a central textual and imagistic component of the everyday life of Soviet communism – and the art historical languages of 'conceptual art' and then 'contemporary art'.

Groys does not mention the difference between 'conceptual art' and 'conceptualism' as

5 For the critical claim that 'contemporary art is postconceptual art', see P. Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London: Verso, 2013, pp.3 and 46-53 in particular.

6 B. Groys, 'Moscow Romantic Conceptualism' (1979), reprinted in B. Groys, *History Becomes Form*, op. cit., pp.35-55.

7 B. Groys, *History Becomes Form*, op. cit., p.7.

8 Indeed, this remained true into the new century. The most comprehensive anthology, published at the turn of the century – *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson – contains no reference to conceptual art practices in Moscow. Its only references beyond the Anglophone world and Europe are to Latin America. For the range of philosophical positions within even this narrow band of practices, see P. Osborne, 'Conceptual Art and/ as Philosophy', in Jon Bird and Michael Newman (ed.), *Rewriting Conceptual Art: Critical and Historical Approaches*, London: Reaktion Books, 1999, pp.47-65.

9 B. Groys, *History Becomes Form*, op. cit., p.7; emphasis added. Of the first generation of canonical US conceptual artists it was really only Dan Graham who based his practice in a form of cultural analysis. See D. Graham, *Rock My Religion: Writings and Art Projects, 1965-1990* (ed. Brian Wallis), Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993.

10 Andrey Platonov, *Happy Moscow* (trans. Robert and Elizabeth Chandler), New York: New York Review of Books, 2012.

11 B. Groys, *History Becomes Form*, op. cit., p.3.

12 In fact, the very concept of everyday life (*byt*, in Russian) has one of its main genealogical starting points in the Soviet debates of the 1920s. See John Roberts, *Philosophizing the Everyday: Revolutionary Praxis and the Fate of Cultural Theory*, London: Pluto, 2006, chapter 1; and Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005, chapters 1 and 2.

critical and historical terms – although it was the silent choice of the latter over the former that allowed him to dispense with a comparative analysis of the relations of the Russian art in question to the ‘founding’ conceptual practices in New York in the 1960s. The ‘ism’ term marks a looser affinity, to the point of a critical slackening, in those relations. In this regard, conceptual *ism* functions as a mediating term between ‘conceptual art’ and ‘contemporary art’, as critical categories – generalising the former, whilst specifying the latter. And during the 1990s, it was ‘Moscow Conceptualism’ – alongside ‘Latin American Conceptualism’ – that came to play a central geo-political role in that mediating movement of generalisation. In fact, there is a serial development of critical art historical terms and concepts at stake here, which runs: conceptual art; conceptual *ism*; conceptualisms; contemporary art; postconceptual art. This is a serial development with a narrative logic that retrospectively overdetermines the conceptual dynamics of the series.

Retrospection plays a constitutive role, to the point of retroactivity, in art historical narrative here. (Retrospection is an epistemological category – call it hindsight. Retroactivity is a temporal-ontological process by which what Walter Benjamin called the ‘afterlife’ (*Nachleben*) of a work comes to determine what it is, and hence also what it was, although, paradoxically, it could not be that in its own time.) The retroactive constitution of critical categories dictates that the term ‘Moscow conceptualism’ means something more now than it did when it was first coined in 1979. In particular, the meaning of ‘Moscow Conceptualism’ has become overdetermined by what we might call a Kabakov effect.¹³ For it is Ilya Kabakov’s role in the development of the installation form in the West, from the mid-1980s through to the end of the 90s, that retrospectively overdetermines the meaning of ‘Moscow Conceptualism’ as a privileged moment in the transition from ‘conceptual art’ to ‘contemporary art’, and hence as a signifier of the conceptual character of contemporary art itself – a character that is actually best grasped, I have argued elsewhere, by the idea of postconceptual art, or the postconceptual character of contemporary art as such. First, however, before we look at the structure and mediating function of the field of conceptualisms, it is necessary to reconnect what is perhaps the most enduring of the 1960s interpretations of conceptual art to its suppressed Soviet lineage.

Dematerialisation: A Soviet Genealogy

As is well known, the term and the concept of conceptual art in its founding and still hegemonic Anglo-American sense (representing, like ‘minimal art’, a small set of competing practices) can be traced back to 1967–69, in its distinction from Henry Flynt’s earlier ‘concept art’ (which was a medium-based category), in the famous essays by Sol Lewitt (‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Art’, 1967), Lucy Lippard and John Chandler (‘The Dematerialization of Art’, 1967/68), Art & Language (introduction to *Art-Language: The Journal of Conceptual Art*, May 1969) and Joseph Kosuth (‘Art After Philosophy’, 1969).¹⁴ Of course, some of the practices to which the idea refers clearly predate its formulation, going back to at least 1961 in the immediately pre-Fluxus conjuncture in New York, as well as much further back to early Duchamp.

There are two things of significance to note about the early critical discourse of conceptual art in relation to the category of Moscow conceptualism. The first is the *singularity and universality* of the claim made by the idea of conceptual art in its strongest ‘analytical’ forms. The second concerns an intriguing historical contingency in the background to one of its main, and most enduring, interpretations: the idea of dematerialisation, through which conceptual art appears as part of the afterlife not of Duchamp but of 1920s Soviet Constructivism.

The ‘universality’ of the idea of conceptual art derives from its claims for a redefinition of art as such; most famously, in Kosuth’s statement ‘All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually.’¹⁵ Art & Language had a similarly strong programme. Of the critical founders, LeWitt alone was more constrained: he thought of conceptual art only as a particular kind of art, among others. These are critical philosophical claims. The most widely disseminated – and also immediately contested, by Art & Language for example¹⁶ – has been what is now thought of as Lucy Lippard’s ‘dematerialisation’ thesis, although it first appeared in Lippard and Chandler’s previously mentioned short article,

13 See the *October* magazine special issue on Marcel Duchamp, *The Duchamp Effect*, *October*, vol.70, Autumn 1994.

14 See A. Alberro and B. Stimson (ed.), *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, *op. cit.*, pp.12–16, 46–50, 98–104 and 158–77, respectively.

15 Joseph Kosuth, ‘Art After Philosophy’, in *ibid.*, p.164.

written in late 1967 and published in the February 1968 issue of *Art International*. This essay provided the basis for the first subtitle of Lippard's famous 1973 anthology *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972: a cross-reference book of information on some esthetic boundaries: consisting of a bibliography into which are inserted a fragmented text, art works, documents, interviews, and symposia, arranged chronologically and focused on so-called conceptual or information or idea art with mentions of such vaguely designated areas as minimal, anti-form, systems, earth, or process art, occurring now in the Americas, Europe, England, Australia, and Asia (with occasional political overtones) edited and annotated by Lucy R. Lippard*. Surely one of the greatest book titles of all time.

The source of this notion of dematerialisation, I would like to suggest, lies not merely in an intuitive sense of the process-based immateriality of the results of the art practices of the mid-1960s, and their relations to language and performance in particular, but much further back, to the Soviet avant-garde; specifically, to El Lissitzky's 1926 essay 'The Future of the Book', the English translation of which appeared in *New Left Review* in 1967 – a few months before Lippard and Chandler wrote their essay.¹⁷ In Lissitzky's essay, dematerialisation is associated not with language, concept or mental representation, but with energy.

*The idea moving the masses today is called materialism, but dematerialisation is the characteristic of the epoch. For example, correspondence grows, so the number of letters, the quantity of writing paper, the mass of material consumed expands, until relieved by the telephone. Again, the network and material of supply grow until they are relieved by the radio. Matter diminishes, we dematerialise, sluggish masses of matter are replaced by liberated energy. This is the mark of our epoch.*¹⁸

There follows a tabulated comparison of forms of transport with those of 'verbal traffic':

<i>Interventions in the field of verbal traffic</i>	<i>Interventions in the field of general traffic</i>
<i>Articulated language.....</i>	<i>Upright gait</i>
<i>Writing.....</i>	<i>The wheel</i>
<i>Guttenberg's printing-press.....</i>	<i>Carts drawn by animal power</i>
<i>?.....</i>	<i>The automobile</i>
<i>?.....</i>	<i>The aeroplane</i>

Blank topological spaces appear, already reserved for the computer and the digital. In the meantime, before the generalised replacement of the book by 'auto-vocalising and kino-vocalising representations', a new international graphic language was taken to be required: the international 'hieroglyphic book', as opposed to the national 'alphabetic book'. This universalism was thus radically 'non-national', in contrast to the 'language' of Art & Language, which was, of course, English, albeit standing in for a mooted philosophically ideal language of propositions. In this respect, we can say that in its founding manifestation, 'conceptual art' was indeed *Anglo-American*, even though many of its main practitioners were Japanese (Yoko Ono, On Kawara), European (Hanne Darboven, Bas Jan Ader) and South American (Hélio Oiticica).

The prioritisation of energy over language as the means of 'dematerialisation' considerably broadens the scope of 'conceptual art' (acted out in its extensive definition in Lippard's anthology) and prefigures the critical expansion of the notion in the course of the subsequent decades. With regard to Seth Siegelau's famous photograph of New York conceptual art's 'gang of four', for example, it suggests the priority of Robert Barry and Douglas Huebler (on the left) over Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner (on the right) – an inversion of the way that history has usually been written. It is interesting to place this rock-band-style photograph besides the famous image of the Collective Actions group used by Tupitsyn in the vestibule to the Russian

16 As excerpted in Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966-1972* (1973), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, pp.43-44.

17 El Lissitzky, 'The Future of the Book', *New Left Review*, vol.1, no.41, January/February 1967, pp.39-44; first published in the *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch*, Mainz: Internationale Guttenberg-Gesellschaft, 1926-27. I am grateful to Juan Rinaldi for pointing out this translation to me in the course of his research on media art in Argentina in the 1960s, where the influence is explicit. See J. Rinaldi, 'Art and Geopolitics: Politics and Autonomy in Argentine Contemporary Art', doctoral thesis, London: Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP), Kingston University, 2013.

18 E. Lissitzky, 'The Future of the Book', *op. cit.*, p.40.



Left:
(From left to right)
Robert Barry,
Douglas Huebler,
Joseph Kosuth and
Lawrence Weiner,
1969. Photograph:
Seth Siegelau.
Courtesy Stichting
Egress Foundation,
Amsterdam



Right:
Collective Actions,
The Russian World,
1985, performance
documentation.
Annotation by
Margarita Tupitsyn
for the Russian
pavilion, 56th Venice
Biennale, 2015,
indicating the four
participants to have
had solo exhibitions
in the Russian
pavilion in the post-
Soviet period

pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2015, to produce a dialectical image of the identity in difference of conceptual art in Moscow, for today.

However, rather than an immanent expansion of conceptual art as a critical category, what happened in most of the curatorial and critical literature from the end of the 1970s onwards (emblematically in Groys's 1979 essay), leading up to the 'Global Conceptualism' exhibition at the Queens Museum of Art in New York in 1998,¹⁹ and beyond, was an increasing deployment of the more generalised 'ism' term, conceptualism, in a historically generalised manner, to cover a geo-politically expanded range of artistic contexts. Meanwhile, a mimetic and often jokey neo-conceptual art developed in the practices of a new generation of artists in the 1990s in the UK and the US, for which the portmanteau term 'conceptualism' was also frequently used, further loosening the remaining critical purchase of the latter.

Conceptualism: Two Critical Strategies

The category of conceptualism is a part of the afterlife of Conceptual art from which the concept of conceptual art itself must nevertheless be critically distinguished. For the extended pluralisation of practices inherent in the structure of the 'ism' presupposes the necessary failure of the strong analytical version of the conceptual programme. In contrast to the claimed universality and singularity of 'conceptual art', this pluralisation is necessarily a relativisation. The main form taken by the pluralisation of conceptualisms was a multiplication of relatively independent national contexts: Moscow conceptualism (standing in for 'Russian conceptualism'), Latin American conceptualism (more specifically, Argentinean and Uruguayan conceptualisms²⁰), Polish conceptualism, Czech conceptualism, Chinese conceptualism, etc.

This raised two issues: first, the legitimate range of applicability of the label in even its most extended sense ('Is there such a thing as African Conceptualism?', Okwui Enwezor asks in a well-known piece);²¹ and second, the theoretical mode of its global totalisation and purely geospatial unification, as projected in the 'Global Conceptualism' show. Responses to each issue have tended to be polarised. With regard to the applicability of the label, on the one hand, there is an export/import model of influence; 'Who was reading *Artforum* and *Studio International*, where, in the mid-to-late 1960s?' being the leading question. (More artists than you might think, in fact.) On the other hand, there is a model of independent multiple paths to broadly similar destinations. The former leads to a totalising method of the aggregation/accumulation of new national contexts for the artistic elaboration of a single idea, while the latter tends towards a perspectival pluralisation of universals, requiring that we view the whole history, in each instance, from the standpoint of a distinct geo-political context, as Luis Camnitzer does in his book *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation*, for example.²²

So how do 'Moscow Conceptualism' and 'Moscow Romantic conceptualism', in particular, fit into this history?

19 'Global Conceptualism' was an extraordinarily important exhibition for its idea, even though curatorially it was a highly restricted one because of the state of the generalised knowledge and availability of works at the time. See L. Camnitzer, J. Farver and R. Weiss (ed.), *Global Conceptualism*, *op. cit.*

20 Although, interestingly, not Brazilian conceptualism - historically, as a national category, within this particular moment in the literature - because of the specificity of the post-neo-concretist lineage, perhaps. See L. Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin American Art*, *op. cit.*

21 Okwui Enwezor, 'Is there such a thing as African Conceptualism?', in Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe (ed.), *Authentic/Ex-Centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*, Ithaca, NY: Forum for African Arts, 2002, pp.72-82.

22 See L. Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin American Art*, *op. cit.*



Installation view,
first APTART
exhibition, 1982.
Photograph: George
Kiesewalter.
Courtesy Nikita
Alekseev

As we have seen, Groys's essay is distinctive in attempting an art critical specification of the geo-political label, via the term 'Romantic'. Despite the 'weight' claimed for the term 'Moscow', it is the 'Romantic' that carries the methodological burden of discrimination, with the term 'conceptualism' acting as little more than a silent, abstract ground enabling the comparison. However, if one digs deeper into the philosophical history of early German Romanticism, one finds arguments for the philosophically 'Romantic' status of conceptual art tout court, as the philosophically oriented practice of a generic (non-medium based) conception of art. Or, to put it another way, if one rereads philosophical Romanticism genealogically, from the standpoint of contemporary art, what one finds, retroactively, is the anticipation of conceptual art.²³

What is at stake here is the continuing priority of poetics over aesthetics. This is why Jacques Rancière is so very, very wrong in his insistence on what he calls the 'aesthetic regime'. This Romanticism was expressed negatively in now classical Anglo-American conceptual art in its campaign against the aesthetic institution of the spectatorship of 'the beholder', as theorised in particular by Charles Harrison of *Art & Language*.²⁴ It was expressed positively by more explicitly Romantic US conceptual artists like Robert Smithson, and explicitly in conceptual art practices in Moscow, as theorised by Groys. Groys, we might say, stands to Kababov and Collective Actions as Harrison stood to *Art & Language*: playing the double game of being simultaneously a native informant and international mediator. As Groys puts it, in a passage about Lev Rubinstein, life becomes lived as something to be 'read': in 'life as existence in the impossible space of literary language ... things become signs in a poetic sequence'.²⁵ It is this

23 See P. Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, *op. cit.*, chapter 2. Furthermore, with regard to the missing theorisation of conceptualism as an 'ism' (as opposed to conceptual art), there is in this particular instance a more submerged philosophical logic, with an independent genealogy. This is the logic of conceptualism not as an art historical or art critical category but as a purely philosophical position: broadly, the theory that universals can be said to exist, but only as concepts in the mind. It is a modern version of scholastic nominalism. If you look up 'conceptualism', even on Wikipedia today, for example, you won't find an art movement or an art critical category - all you will find is a description of this philosophical position. Belief in the conceptual character of art does not commit you to any philosophical position on the status of concepts. But it is allied to, and has affinities with, the more psychologistic and 'spiritual' philosophical self-understanding of some, rather than other, conceptual art practices: LeWitt as opposed to Kosuth, for example; and also the more scientific versions of the mystical strand of Moscow Conceptualism (cosmicism), within which science and mysticism are in no way simple opposites.

24 Charles Harrison, 'Conceptual Art and the Suppression of the Beholder', *Essays on Art & Language*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, pp.29-62.

poetic sequence that ties conceptual art (all conceptual art) and the conceptual aspects of all art, to narrative, and in particular to storytelling as an oral tradition.

The Corridor of Two Banalities

In the alternative institution of the apartment as exhibition space in Moscow, 1982–84, everyday life was retold through the accumulation and re-staging of its objects, so that the apartment itself quickly became not just the scene of the exhibition but part of the narrative structure of the exhibited object itself. Such ‘apartment art’, or APTART as it became known, was both the stage for the creation of characters, in which visitors such as Kabakov invested their productive subjectivity, and the site of a constructed world inhabited conjointly by APTART artists and their works.²⁶ In its role as an enclosed fictional environment in which artists acted out various personae, the Moscow apartment was the mediating form of the transition to installation art as a dominant genre of contemporary art immanent to ‘Moscow Conceptualism’. Works by Kabakov emblematic of this transition include *The Man Who Flew Into Space from his Apartment* (1985; first shown in New York in 1988) and *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away (The Garbage Man)* (1988, permanently installed in the old Norwegian national bank building in Oslo that forms part of the Nasjonalmuseet/National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design). Garbage was a central theme in Kabakov’s rota paintings of the early 1980s, such as *Taking Out the Garbage Can* (1980). *The Man Who Flew* and *The Man Who Never* are transitional works between Kabakov the Moscow Conceptualist and Kabakov the international installation artist of the 1990s, a trajectory that has led up to such vast works as the 2014 Monumenta installation in the Grand Palais in Paris, within which a series of separate rooms/buildings were constructed to produce a multiplicity of installation spaces.

This transition also involved an explicit mediation of Kabakov’s work with the canonical New York conceptual art of the late 1960s, in the form of *The Corridor of Two Banalities* (1994), a joint work/installation with Kosuth at the Centre for Contemporary Art at Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw.²⁷ This exhibition staged the dialectical identity and difference between ‘New York’ and ‘Moscow’ in the afterlife of a certain conceptual art as installation art. It is precisely here, after 1989, that those ‘local issues’ to which Tupitsyn refers are ‘channelled into’ in a new international (soon to become globally transnational) art language. The work is made up of texts (and in Kabakov’s case, a few postcard images): fictional texts of the agendas and minutes of the meetings of residents of collective apartments, on the Moscow side, and of quotations from famous figures that approach the status of Jenny Holzer-type ‘truisms’, on the New York one – the vacuous rhetoric of a certain international politics.²⁸ These are two geo-politically very different kinds of banality, dialectically identified in the mutuality of their banality as such. Kabakov seeks his place in an international lineage; Kosuth seeks the critical redemption provided by historical meaning.²⁹ Here, the specificity of ‘Moscow Conceptualism’ (‘the artistic expression of everyday life under Soviet communism’ – the Constructivists would have said: ‘The material expression of communist structures!’) is at once communicated and internally negated by a generic art format, of which it was partially constitutive, but which now wholly overdetermines its artistic effect – in the transition from Moscow conceptual art to a proto-global contemporary art. Under these conditions, rather than being a carrier of Soviet history, the fictionalisation of the Soviet erases the hinge between history and fiction, leaving history engulfed by fiction; or, to put it another way, leaving Soviet history engulfed by Western art. ‘Moscow’, shed of its ‘weight’, is no match for the Western term ‘contemporary art’. This is the Kabakov effect.

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- 25 B. Groys, ‘Moscow Romantic Conceptualism’, *op. cit.*, p.42. See also P. Osborne, ‘Image, Information, Story: Akram Zataari After Conceptual Art’, forthcoming; and in the Russian context, Maria Chehonadskih, ‘Forma Iskysstva kak oposredovanie: istoriya i povestvovanie do i posle kontseptualizma’ (‘Art Form as Mediation: History and Story-telling Before and After Conceptual Art’), forthcoming.
- 26 See Ilya Kabakov, ‘Artist-Character’ (1985, trans. Cynthia Martin), which will be included in the forthcoming title in Afterall’s *Exhibition Histories* series, *Anti-Shows: APTART 1982–84*, edited by Margarita Tupitsyn, Victor Tupitsyn and David Morris, published in association with the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College.
- 27 *The Corridor of Two Banalities* (25 April–3 September 1994) was curated by Milada Slizinska.
- 28 The generic model within Kosuth’s own work for this practice (taking up a well-known trope of Walter Benjamin’s) is his 1968 ‘Editorial in 27 Parts’, published in the first issue of the New York School of Visual Art’s journal *Straight*, which Kosuth himself edited. The most recent and largest enactment of the Benjaminian literary fantasy of a book composed wholly of quotations is Kenneth Goldsmith’s enormous *Capital: New York, Capital of the 20th Century* (London: Verso, 2015).
- 29 Kosuth was at this time reinventing himself as a Hungarian-American artist – the US-identity-politics route to historical meaning.

This is a revised version of a talk presented on 6 November 2015 at the V-A-C Foundation in Moscow.



Walter Benjamin,
'Mondrian '63-'96',
lecture at Cankarjev
dom, organised by
the Marxist Center
and ŠKUC gallery,
Ljubljana, 1986.
All images courtesy
Walter Benjamin

Not Now: A Conversation with Walter Benjamin

–David Morris

*At the time of writing, the adult life of Walter Benjamin – the period of thirty years between 1910 and 1940 – is equal to the thirty years that have passed since the reappearance of Walter Benjamin into public life, in a cultural centre in Ljubljana in 1986.¹ Benjamin's writing these past thirty years (collected in the 2013 volume *Recent Writings*²), and the projects that surround him (such as the Museum of American Art³) have developed a theory of the copy as a meta-original, which is bound up with an 'almost ethnographic' approach towards the belief systems that sustain the field of contemporary art. Here the story of art is told through its founding myths, its rituals, believers and agnostics – its familiar events are retold and repeated until cracks and loops form in the historical record. If this*

Walter Benjamin discusses his theory of meta-time, modernity's futures and the end of 'art' as we know it.

approach is sometimes playful, it seems to say: how else to approach an analysis of the many terrible crises of the contemporary moment, except with a smile? It is also perhaps a counterweight to a much bigger joke, that of trying to step outside, predict or understand the sweeps of history. In any case, more than capital-h History, it is a reading of the present that seems to drive the contemporary Benjamin: to beckon some alternative, heretofore unrecognisable set of relations; to 'read what was never written', as a 41-year-old Benjamin wrote in 1933, following the most ancient systems of meaning-making, 'entrails, the stars, or dances.'⁴ The technical assistant at the Museum of American Art gave me a Gmail address for Walter Benjamin, and so our conversation began.

David Morris: In our exchanges leading up to this interview, you described yourself as a 'character outside of time'. Could you say more about what this means to you?

Walter Benjamin: Being 'outside of time' means being outside of the linear chronological timeline that is the backbone of history, as a story consisting of unique characters, artefacts and events. Sometimes telling the truth is not exactly the right thing to do. Let's say I go to a theatre for the first time. The play is *Hamlet*. The curtain goes up, and at some point – to my great surprise – I begin to realise that Hamlet is in fact my neighbour Joe, whom I know well. I immediately jump out of my seat and start explaining this to the 'naïve' audience. I would, of course, be telling the truth, but this would be the end of the play. We wouldn't be able to find out where that story would have taken us, or the entire experience that comes with it. This would be one way to interpret my present identity. However, in a theatre there is usually a clear distinction between the stage and the real world, while accepting me, as in this interview, indicates that the 'real world' could be understood as a stage as well, and we are all playing certain roles on it.

DM: And it's now been thirty years since your lecture 'Mondrian '63-'96' in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in 1986 – the event that marked the reappearance of Walter Benjamin in public life...

WB: In my 1986 lecture, at some point I was trying to understand what might be the consequences of having Mondrian paintings, apparently copies, dated after his death, hanging in two different places on the museum timeline. I ended my lecture with the following realisation: 'These paintings rely neither on the coordinates of time, nor on coordinates of identity,

1 The lecture 'Mondrian '63-'96', organised by the Marxist Center and ŠKUC Gallery, Ljubljana.

2 Walter Benjamin, *Recent Writings*, Los Angeles: New Documents, 2013.

3 The Museum of American Art was featured in *Afterall* 37, with essays by Steven ten Thije and Our Literal Speed: see *Afterall*, issue 37, Autumn/Winter 2014, pp.75-89.

4 Walter Benjamin, 'On the Mimetic Faculty' (1933, trans. Edmund Jephcott) in *Selected Writings: Volume 2, Part 2: 1931-34* (ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996, p.722. I am grateful to Denise Ferreira da Silva, Valentina Desideri and other participants at the 'Experiments in Entangled Existence' study group at The Showroom, London, 2016 for discussion/enaction of this text.

nor on coordinates of meaning. They simply hover, and the only comprehensible sense of their existence which we can accept with certainty are these questions themselves.’ Clearly, within a historical narrative there is no place for two identical paintings attributed to the same author, one of them dated after his death. It is a historical impossibility, and that second painting is in some way ‘outside of history’. In order to have this painting placed within a history, we have to change its proposition, for example by using quotation marks (‘Mondrian’), or the prefix ‘pseudo’ (pseudo-Mondrian), etc. Thus, within the story called history this painting is not attributed to Mondrian but to ‘Mondrian’. However, we might consider stories other than history in which the second painting (a copy) could be by Mondrian as well. One such story is a meta-history. It remembers history but its constitutive notions are not the same as those of history (chronology and uniqueness).

It is interesting to notice that in my 1986 lecture, while I was talking about the reappearance of Mondrian paintings signed using his initials but dated after his death, I didn’t reflect on the fact that I was in a similar role, giving a lecture many years after my own death. In that moment, I was as much a historical impossibility as those Mondrian paintings. In a chronological (historical) sense it is true. It’s been almost thirty years since my first reappearance, but I do not consider myself to be primarily a historical character. Rather, I see myself being in a way timeless, outside of history, the same as those copies of/by Mondrian that I tried to understand back then. However, even this, my recollection, cannot escape chronology in some way – thinking about it thirty years since my first reappearance. How do I, or how could I, relate to or remember all those years?

Not long ago, in the reviews of the *Recent Writings* book, I noticed various interpretations of my identity, from direct attribution to some other (contemporary) person, to using quotation marks (‘Walter Benjamin’), to complete respect for the propositions related to my current identity, without appearing to be ‘naïve’.⁵ A single Walter Benjamin is meaningful only within a narrative that is based on chronology and the uniqueness of its characters; in other words, within a story called history. As a character within a meta-history, I am timeless. I could appear in various events, stories, tales and episodes, and even give the same lecture in two different places simultaneously.

DM: When the caretaker of the Museum of American Art put us in touch, he was telling me about an exhibition he was involved in hanging a few years ago titled ‘Not-Now’, which you wrote a text for.⁶ It seems to have been based in similar concerns. Could you describe the project?

WB: Once, while I was looking into the way we structure the time as *past*, *present* and *future*, I began thinking about whether it would make sense to have a simpler, binary structure of *now* and *not-now*. *Not-now* would be a blend of two components: *past* and *future*. Usually we place *past* before *now*, and *future*, after. Would it in some cases make more sense if *past* and *future* changed places, or even became an indistinguishable mixture of these two? Or could this *not-now* be something completely different from *past* and *future*? Furthermore, would it be possible to think about the world, about ourselves, as having only *now*, or as without any notion of time at all?

Since these are thoughts expressed through words and sentences – with all the limitations of the verbal language – I began wondering if it would be possible to use some other means, let’s say pictures, to articulate the way we structure time. This is how the idea for an exhibition of paintings came to my mind. At some point I remembered seeing an unusual collection of old religious paintings hanging in some obscure place in Belgrade, where I also lectured on Mondrian back in the 1980s. I thought that perhaps there might be other copies of modern art hidden somewhere. And I was right. Through with my old contacts there I was able to find copies of Mondrian, Picasso, Duchamp, Malevich, Arp, Picabia... Some were apparently left from the 1986 Armory Show (dated 1993) that took place in Belgrade a few months after my lecture.⁷ Then, with some ‘digging’, we located the religious paintings as well: *The Crucifixion*, *The Entombment*, *The Immaculate Conception*, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, *Saint Michael*, *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness*...

5 See Clancy Martin’s review in *The Brooklyn Rail*, 15 July 2014, available at http://www.brooklynrail.org/2014/07/art_books/walter-benjamin-recent-writings (last accessed on 12 July 2016).

6 ‘Not Now’, Novobeogradska kulturna mreža (New Belgrade Cultural Network), Belgrade, 2013.

7 ‘International Exhibition of Modern Art, New York, 1993’, Muzej Savremene Umetnosti (Museum of Contemporary Art), Belgrade, 1986.



Installation view, 'Not-Now', Novobeogradska kulturna mreža (New Belgrade Cultural Network), Belgrade, 2013

This turned out to be very good combination of paintings for 'Not-Now'. They were hung in the foyer of an amateur theatre located on the periphery of New Belgrade, with the pre-modern paintings preceding the modern and sometimes even partially overlapping with them. And this was the text that accompanied the exhibition:

The pictures before us represent scenes of times gone by. They were all icons in stories of religion and of art. Some depicted events from the past, while others anticipated the future. Today, they are nothing more than artefacts displayed here neither as art nor as religion. While the pictures of the future became antiquities, the world emerging before us begins to resemble stories from the distant past. In a way it seems that the differences between the future and the past are disappearing, as if they are both becoming the one and the same meta-time that is not-now.

DM: How could social life be structured without chronology?

WB: In rural Europe for many centuries there was no need to structure time chronologically in order to organise life. For social stability it was sufficient to structure each year according to the climate. There were four distinct climate seasons, each with specific rules of behaviour that would be repeated in cycles. It was not necessary to know what the current year was, or according to which calendar. A person, for example, wouldn't know the year of his or her birth. With other members of the same generation, she or he would pass through several stages of life: child, young adult, married, parent, elder. This five-point structure is itself timeless, and the (biological) changes, although manifested in time, are not necessarily chronological. Since the existing social paradigm is based on chronology, there are two possible options to get out of it. One would be to forget chronology and return to a rural, non-chronological structure. Another possibility would be a meta-chronology, a structure that would remember or reflect chronology but without itself being based on chronology. This could be some kind of network, a structure based on neighbourhood relationships, like the graphs in topology.

DM: This also makes me think of the Salon de Fleurus, held in a New York apartment since the early 1990s. Its environment conjured an alternative reality, where different timelines were made to clash and coexist, and where modernism becomes something like a distant memory, a set of half-remembered founding myths and artefacts. Do you know this project?

Prehistory



Modernism



Egypt



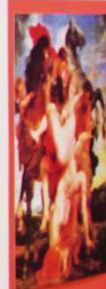
Greece



Neoclassicism



Baroque



WB: The 1990s seem to have been almost a period of hibernation for me. I don't remember doing much those years, but from what I learned about it later, the Salon de Fleurus was a kind of re-creation of the early collection of modern art assembled by Gertrude Stein and her brother Leo in Paris. Placed in a private apartment outside of the art scene, the New York Salon was exhibiting not original works but some kind of copies, in sepia colour, of well-known paintings by Picasso, Matisse and Cézanne. I heard that a visitor once noted that the paintings looked as if they were 'older than the originals'; another, that it was like an 'ethnographic exhibition of modern art'. This is perhaps one of the most profound interpretations of what Salon de Fleurus was, but here the 'other' doesn't come from some 'exotic and faraway land': the other in this case is 'us', Western culture, and art as one of its inventions.

DM: This idea, the 'ethnographic exhibition of modern art', chimes with work currently being done around decolonisation, among a wide spectrum of attempts to negotiate the manifold violences perpetrated in the name of Western modernity. From the perspective of the contemporary geo-political situation we find ourselves in, with all its crises and uncertainties, what is your sense of 'what's next'? Or if 'what's next' is too linear a question, at least, 'what's *not-now*'?

WB: The present is usually chaotic. When the present becomes the past, we can make stories about it and thus introduce order into the chaos. This is why a 'museum of modern art' could be only about what modern art *was* and not what it *is*, while 'museum of contemporary art' is an oxymoron.

It seems it is usually much easier to (re)interpret the past than to anticipate the future, and the way we (re)interpret the past in many ways determines what we are going to do in the

In recent decades the art scene has become one of the places for social critique, similar to the institution of the court jester.

future. This way of thinking makes sense within the existing linear triad: past-present-future. However, to go outside this linear model, everything that is not now we could call 'not-now'. This 'not-now' is not 'time', it is a 'meta-time'. For instance, we could hold a photograph of a tree in front of the same tree, and they both exist now, but the photograph remembers another instance of time

that was once 'now' but that is now 'not-now'. This recorded and frozen 'now' is a reflected time, it is a 'meta-time'. Similarly, anticipating a future event is imagining it now – in a way 'remembering' it in the present, although it didn't happen yet.

Meta-history remembers history, the meta-original remembers the original, meta-art remembers art, the meta-museum remembers the museum. And the constitutive notions of meta are not the same as the constitutive notions of what it is meta to: a copy is a meta-original, and although it remembers the original, its defining properties are different – in fact, opposite to it. A copy is, in this way, an antithesis of the original. Similarly, constitutive notions of meta-history could not be the same as those that structure history, namely, chronology and uniqueness. Meta-history could be a non-chronological time structure (like in a myth or a tale), or it could be a timeless structure like a web – and also, its characters and events are not unique.

As I mentioned earlier, a copy of a modern painting is not a modern painting. It is only the subject matter that is modern while the method itself (copying/imitation) is pre-modern. Thus, when we are looking at an exhibition based on copies of modern paintings, we are in some way looking into modernity through pre-modern – in a way, medieval – glasses. The fact that this kind of exhibition 'remembers' modernity while it is, itself, not modern, indicates that we are entering another territory we could call a meta-modernity.

Any attempt to 'de-modernise' could not be neutral: the question is whether it is going to be more on the side of remembering than on the side of forgetting. Christianity was, in its first centuries, on the side of forgetting the past (Rome), while the French Revolution, although attempting to forget (the Middle Ages), turned out to be on the side of remembering thanks to its embrace of history as a new and seemingly objective story about the past, based on chronology and uniqueness. By remembering (interpreting/reflecting) modernity through its antithesis, we are of course not modern any more – but we are not exactly medieval either.

Culturally, it seems we are already living in the transitional period that will mark not

Previous spread:
The Making of Art History, installation view, from the exhibition 'The Unmaking of Art', e-flux, New York, 2014-15

only the end of modernism but the end of modernity as well. Most likely there will first be a 'return to the Middle Ages' (pre-modernity) with an emphasis on religion (Christianity in the West) as a key common identity and a simultaneous adoption and reinterpretation of some of the achievements of the Enlightenment, primarily natural (experimental) science and technology. At the same time, there will be an effort to forget modernity as much as is possible. Modernity itself has exhausted its potential mainly because of its claim on universality (the 'single point of view'). This is the primary reason for its decline, not because the 'new medieval' position offers a better alternative. Both Christianity and modernity played the key roles in shaping the 'Western world' and brought us where we are today. The difference between these two was that modernity was in essence a meta-Christianity. It came out of Christianity while remembering it, but was at the same time outside of it. Until now, one could see (experience) Christianity in two ways: by being a believer and thus inside it, or being secular and observing it from the position of modernity. Meta-modernity should define a third position from which we might see Christianity, looking through the glasses of modernity (through history), but from which we might also observe it from outside of modernity and remain non-believers.

DM: How does contemporary art, along with its existing characters, institutions and histories, fit into this?

WB: While meta-modernity will try to redefine and incorporate science and technology, it is likely that the importance of art, art history and art museums, as we know them today, will decline. Art as a notion will become obsolete – for me, it already is – together with the notions of uniqueness, originality and authorship, while what will remain of its infrastructure will have to change its role and meaning. Art as a national symbol ('the French model') will decline, together with the decline of the importance of the nation state; art as a commodity ('the Dutch model') will continue to exist as long as investors can profit. This is the main driving force behind the art market today. People are buying art not in order to support certain ideas, but as a trophy, expecting that its value will increase with time. In a way, this is not much different from collecting stamps or baseball cards – or stocks, for that matter.

Then, there is the art scene. In recent decades it has become one of the places for social critique, in some ways similar to the institution of the court jester. It is a stage on which, under the umbrella of artistic freedom, certain critical ideas can be articulated and expressed with impunity; one on which one (an artist) can speak 'truth to power'. This can be, of course, an important social role, but the question is how effective it is, and whether it is sustainable in the long run if the very idea of art becomes obsolete.

Then, the art museums: most of them will probably morph into some kind of cultural museum (meta-museum), into places where a certain kind of culture called 'art' will be remembered. These might resemble anthropological museums, of art as a Western invention, while the (art) history, as a corresponding notion, will be remembered through meta-history. We should not forget that both museum and history, defined within Western culture, colonised their own (Western) past before beginning to colonise the 'others'. Thus, meta-modernity would enable a platform open to other cultures as well, but on equal footing with the one that defines the West. From this place we should be able to approach all of them from the outside while not necessarily belonging to any of them.

In existing classical art museums there are, in principle, two kinds of artefacts. Ones that were produced before the emergence of the museum and others produced after (in the field of museums). The first group has at least two layers of meaning (let's say a religious painting in a church that becomes an artwork in a museum). Those works produced after the museum's emergence have only one layer of meaning: they are only works of art. When some of these artworks get another layer of meaning, through some process of 'de-artisation', it will indicate that we are in a different paradigm. One that is meta in relation to the present paradigm.

DM: Finally, could I ask what you are working on now?

WB: Right now I am working on this, our conversation, and everything else is not-now.



Abbas Akhavan,
Study for a Monument
(2013–15), cast
bronze, white cotton
sheets, dimensions
variable. Photograph:
Toni Hafkenschied.
Courtesy the artist
and Mercer Union,
Toronto

The Body in Ruins: Abbas Akhavan's *Study for a Monument*

– Georgina Jackson

The way we act toward 'others' is shaped by the way we imagine them. Both philosophic and literary descriptions of such imagining show the difficulty of picturing other persons in their full weight and solidity.

– Elaine Scarry, 'The Difficulty of Imagining Other People'¹

Abbas Akhavan's *Study for a Monument* (2013–15) presents bronze plants laid out on a series of white cotton bed sheets across the gallery floor. These are the forms of *Asperula insignis*, *Delphinium micranthum* and *Ornithogalum iragense*, amongst many others. Akhavan employs bronze as a material that is steeped in history: it connects the invention of human tools and language with the fabrication of weapons and the erection of monuments. Yet here on the floor there is an assertion of horizontality over verticality: materials are laid out like a forensic experiment, a mass grave or funerary tokens. These plants are not being used as simple adornment, nor to disguise support systems. These are all species native to an area

between and around the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, in present-day Iraq. From plant pressings and digital images, they have been enlarged to human scale – sculpted into plasticine, cast into wax, encased within plaster, melted, cast into bronze and charred.

Georgina Jackson explores the traces and taxonomies of war through Abbas Akhavan's *Study for a Monument*.

The remnants of these material processes remain: shattered plaster invades the anatomy of the plants, creating a kind of ghosting against the white cotton sheets. Leaves, stems and flowers appear like dismembered corpses that have been put back together in front of our eyes.

Many of the plants memorialised in *Study for a Monument* are excerpted from six volumes of an archive titled 'The Flora of Iraq', held in the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in London.² Begun in 1960 by the Ministry of Agriculture in Baghdad in collaboration with Kew, this archive project sought to gather and categorise over 3,300 species of flora native to Iraq's deserts, marshes, plains and mountains. As the artist Marina Roy has argued, any archive bears witness to 'a past violence-authority captured through fundamental naming, territorialisation, planting roots, the laying down of laws and rules of conduct and documentation of exchange'.³ With the rising interest in plant taxonomy during the nineteenth century, scientific expeditions ventured across the globe to gather native species and bring them back to the centres of ever-expanding empires. Over 30,000 plant species from around the world grow at Kew Gardens today, while the herbarium holds over seven million species, the largest in the world. Both living and dead, the plants preserved in this depository trace a history of evolution, and histories of generations of plant species, anatomy, systems and families. Plants are as bodies, with traces of their genealogy.

Akhavan's installation was first exhibited under the title *Study for a Hanging Garden* (2014),⁴ hinting at another garden whose presence lingers in the plants' original site. The story of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon has been told and retold since Antiquity. Greek geographers recounted how its terraces could hold full-size trees, shrubs and vines, thanks to an irrigation system that drew water up from the Euphrates River in an otherwise barren land.⁵

1 Elaine Scarry, 'The Difficulty of Imagining Other People', in Martha Craven Nussbaum and Joshua Cohen (ed.), *For Love of Country?*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1996, p.98.

2 The archive is incomplete, with three remaining volumes currently in development. Governmental changes led to the project's cessation in 1985, but it commenced again in 2011. See <http://www.kew.org/science-conservation/research-data/science-directory/projects/flora-iraq> (last accessed on 22 July 2016). Abbas Akhavan also sourced digital images of living plants from the Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh.

3 Marina Roy, *Study for a Glasshouse: Abbas Akhavan* (exh. cat.), Brampton: Peel Art Gallery, 2013, unpaginated. Roy has collaborated with Akhavan on a number of exhibition projects.

4 The work was produced as part of the Abraaj Group Art Prize in 2014.

5 See Strabo, *Geography* (c.20 BCE–23 CE), book XVI, chapter 1, section 5, available at http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Strabo/16A*.html (last accessed on 2 August 2016).



Others claimed that it was built out of a king's love for his wife, who missed the forests of her home.⁶ In the background of a nineteenth-century etching of the Hanging Gardens hovers the colossal structure of the Tower of Babel. Its story in the Book of Genesis details the gathering of multitudes of people at Babylon after the Great Flood, a monolingual humanity who began to build a tower to reach the heavens. On seeing this enterprise, however, God confounded their speech so that they could no longer understand one another, after which they splintered into groups across the globe. The Hanging Gardens and the Tower of Babel act as symbolic forces representing the one-time harmony amongst peoples, and between humanity and nature. The sources for these two stories are multifarious but they mostly locate the mythic structures where the Tigris and Euphrates converge, in the 'cradle of civilisation', near the town of Hillah, about eighty kilometres south of Baghdad.⁷

It was also here that Saddam Hussein reconstructed the 600-room palace of King Nebuchadnezzar II, ruler of Babylonia from approximately 605–562 BCE, who is often believed responsible for the Hanging Gardens. Between 1983 and 1987, at the height of the Iran-Iraq War, thousands of workers were imported from Sudan to lay sixty million sand-coloured bricks over the present-day ruins. The building bears many inscriptions detailing this triumphant construction; one states: 'In the era of President Saddam Hussein all Babylon was reconstructed in three stages, from Nebuchadnezzar to Saddam Hussein, Babylon is rising again.'⁸ Against the backdrop of the casualties of the Iran-Iraq war,⁹ this project was fervently ideological, asserting Iraq's history as the cradle of civilisation and encouraging Iraqis to see themselves as heirs to the great cultures of Babylonia. And yet the palace sat empty.

Following Iraq's defeat in the Gulf War, in 1991 Kurds in the north and Shias in the south rose up against the Hussein-led Baath regime, but were defeated within weeks, with some Shia rebels seeking refuge in the marshlands. As retribution, Hussein set about to exterminate the population of the marshlands – draining the land, setting the reeds on fire and executing thousands of residents in addition to the rebels, including the indigenous, semi-nomadic

Abbas Akhavan,
Study for a Monument
(2013–15), cast
bronze, white cotton
sheets, dimensions
variable. Photograph:
Toni Hafkenscheid.
Courtesy the artist
and Mercer Union,
Toronto

6 See Berossus, cited in Josephus, *Contra Apionem* (c.94 CE), available at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/af/af05.htm> (last accessed on 3 July 2016).

7 Recent scholarship, however, shows that the Gardens may in fact have been located at Nineveh, near today's Mosul, in Northern Iraq. See Dalya Alberge, 'Babylon's hanging garden: ancient scripts give clue to missing wonder', *The Guardian*, 5 May 2013, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2013/may/05/babylon-hanging-garden-wonder-nineveh> (last accessed on 3 July 2016).

8 Quoted in Gerard Russell, *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms: Journeys Into the Disappearing Religions of the Middle East*, London and New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014, p.5.

9 Akhavan was born in Tehran and moved to Canada following the onset of the Iran-Iraq war.

Marsh Arabs and displaced civilians. The destruction of the marshlands displaced hundreds of thousands of Marsh Arabs, of whom at least 40,000 are now living in refugee camps in Iran.¹⁰

The United Nations has described the loss of the Mesopotamian marshlands as ‘one of the world’s greatest environmental disasters’.¹¹ Located along the so-called aridity line, in these areas there is, on average, 200 millimetres of rainfall a year – the minimum required to grow crops at a large scale without irrigation. In surveying the recent history of this ‘threshold of the desert’ – across Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria and Palestine – Eyal Weizman discovered a distinct correlation between climate change and colonialism, drought and drone strikes.¹² He argues that climate change is a direct effect of political forces, entailing the erasure and displacement of entire populations. Naomi Klein is in agreement: ‘Certain patterns have become quite clear; first, Western fighter jets followed by that abundance of oil; now, Western drones are closely shadowing the lack of water, as drought exacerbates conflict.’¹³ Focussing on the city of Daraa in Syria, Weizman notes how the country’s deepest drought on record drew huge numbers of displaced farmers in the years leading up to the outbreak of Syria’s civil war; Daraa is also where the Syrian uprising broke out in 2011. Weizman’s collaborative work with photographer Fazal Sheikh, meanwhile, has documented the Israeli government’s policy to ‘make the desert bloom’, which has translated into the destruction of centuries-old Bedouin settlements in the Negev desert; many Bedouins have found themselves dispossessed of their land rights and livelihood, and pushed far deeper into the desert.¹⁴ It is the garden which is often destroyed during war.



The change of title from *Study for a Hanging Garden* to *Study for a Monument* is significant, for it marks a desire to reinscribe the plant pressings into the present. The plants are enlarged and fragmented, with flower heads resembling human skulls, stems recalling skeletal spines and broken parts taking on the appearance of shards of bone. The green patina of the bronze hints at their referential origin, but they are charred. Physical trauma is evidenced, shattered fragments of plaster invade the forms, and traces remain on the white sheets. In layering archival remains and material trauma with the past and persistent injuring of land and people, *Study for a Monument* posits how trauma can be disclosed, how we can feel and how we feel for others.

Writer Elaine Scarry has explored the limits of language to disclose the human body in pain. She describes how, with the intensification of pain, ‘you can watch language deteriorate. One’s ability to say sentences, and then even one’s ability to say words, disappears.’¹⁵ This incapacity to communicate trauma delineates the very capacity to understand the atrocities of war. This silencing permits us to inflict pain to others – if a little to those we know, for those we don’t know, the ‘ease with which people will license injuring increases, as in a war that one doesn’t fight in oneself but that one agrees to authorise.’¹⁶ Though language doesn’t allow us to express the pain and injury of war, it prevails because of the fraught relation between war and language, that is,

*between the collective casualties that occur within war, and the verbal issues (freedom, national sovereignty, the right to disputed ground, the extra-territorial authority of a particular ideology) that stand outside war, that are there before the act of war begins and after it ends, that are understood by warring populations as the motive and justification and will be again reorganised after the war as the thing substantiated or (if one is on the losing side) not substantiated by war’s activity.*¹⁷

10 See Hassan Partow, *The Mesopotamian Marshlands: Demise of an Ecosystem, Early Warning and Assessment Technical Report*, Geneva: United Nations Environment Programme, 2001, available at <http://www.grid.unep.ch/activities/sustainable/tigris/mesopotamia.pdf> (last accessed on 3 July 2016).

11 *Ibid.*, viii.

12 Eyal Weizman in conversation with George Prochnick, ‘The Desert Threshold’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 18 October 2015, available at <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-desert-threshold/> (last accessed on 3 July 2016).

13 Naomi Klein, ‘Let Them Drown: The Violence of Othering in a Warming World’, *The London Review of Books*, vol. 38, no. 11, 2 June 2016, available at <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n11/naomi-klein/let-them-drown> (last accessed on 3 July 2016).

14 See Fazal Sheikh and Eyal Weizman, *The Conflict Shoreline: Colonialism as Climate Change in the Negev Desert*, Berlin: Steidl Verlag, 2015.

15 Elaine Scarry in conversation with Jennifer L. Geddes, ‘On Evil, Pain and Beauty’, *The Hedgehog Review*, Summer 2000, p. 79.

16 Elizabeth Irene Smith, ‘“The Body in Pain”: an interview with Elaine Scarry’, *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, volume 32, issue 2, September 2006, p. 226.

17 Elaine Scarry, *The Body In Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 63. Emphasis in the original.



Where language falters, Susan Sontag suggested, the photographic image can succeed. To open her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), she wrote:

*To be sure, a cityscape is not made of flesh. Still, sheared-off buildings are almost as eloquent as bodies in the street. (Kabul, Sarajevo, East Mostar, Grozny, sixteen acres of Manhattan after September 1, 2001, the refugee camp in Jenin...) Look, the photographs say, this is what it's like. This is what war does. And that, that is what it does, too. War tears, rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War scorches. War dismembers. War ruins.*¹⁸

Abbas Akhavan,
Untitled Garden,
2008-12, emerald
green cedars, cedar
planters, soil.
Photograph: Toni
Hafkenscheid.
Courtesy the artist
and The Third Line,
Dubai

An early example she cites is Ernst Friedrich's book *Krieg dem Kriege! Guerre à la Guerre! War against War! Oorlog aan den Oorlog!* (1924), which revealed extensive images of World War I previously deemed unpublishable by government censors. Sontag argues that the possibility of replacing image with feeling, peace with horror, is central to the book's example of 'photography as shock therapy'.¹⁹ In Sontag's estimation, it is impossible for the image to capture everything that has occurred; or for the spectator to imagine the real terror of what took place; or, indeed, to contemplate how this trauma could enter into the realm of normality. To bear witness to such images 'is still just watching'.²⁰ And yet, despite its inability to fully disclose the horrors of the war, the image remains necessary.

*Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing – may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget.*²¹

Study for a Monument is not a visual or verbal testimony, it is an act of occupation and commemoration within the white cube, the physical haunting of the acts of war. The plant pressings contained within a series of books within an archive are enlarged and given volume; they hold space. Spread across a series of bed sheets, *Study for a Monument* pushes

18 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, London: Penguin Books, 2003, p.7 Emphasis in the original.

19 *Ibid.*, p.13.

20 *Ibid.*, p.105.

21 *Ibid.*, p.102.

22 Hito Steyerl, *Hito Steyerl: The Wretched of the Screen* (ed. Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood and Anton Vidokle), Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012, p.115.

viewers to the extremities of its perimeters, rendering them unable to contemplate the work's scale in full. This is not the first time that Akhavan has used the occupation of the gallery space as a critical strategy. In *Untitled Garden* (2012), for example, he inserted a 65-foot-long cedar planter of 8-foot-tall trees within the galleries of The Power Plant in Toronto, circumventing arterial access to the galleries. The work presented an impenetrable wall of *Thuja occidentalis*, or emerald cedars, which were transported in early trade between the North American colonies and Great Britain, where they were used for the enclosure of the

**Study for a Monument
*blurs the lines between
object and witness, between
plant and human life,
trauma and testimony.***

playing against Spain in the FIFA World Cup finals, thereby inserting the position of the 'adversary' – momentarily – in a space located between private and public. While Akhavan has become known for lightness of touch in his site-specific, ephemeral installations, there is a weight to *Study for a Monument*, both physically and conceptually.

The sediments of history deposited in these petrified flowers recalls Walter Benjamin's description of how social relations can be condensed into material form. Following Benjamin, Hito Steyerl writes: 'A thing is never just an object, but a fossil in which a constellation of forces are petrified. Things are never just inert objects, passive items or lifeless shucks, but consist of tensions, forces, hidden powers, all being constantly exchanged.'²² Weizman has examined the role that things play in our capacity to understand war and trauma. He outlines how, following attacks on Gaza between December 2008 and January 2009, 'the "interrogation" of ruins and the rubble of destroyed buildings' resulted in 'evidence' to be raised in legal-political disputes.²³ So much so that the UN report on the conflict was 'reinforced by clichés of the kind that often give evidence an almost human status. "Evidence speaks for itself," albeit unlike humans, "it does not lie."²⁴ One should, then, consider the 'biography of objects' in its entirety, since

*it becomes clear that it is not only the moment of death but rather the entire process of life – a sequence of illnesses, incidents and accidents, along with the conditions of nutrition, labour and habit – that is fossilised into the morphology and texture of bones, and that a certain blurring of the boundary between object and subject is here undertaken.*²⁵

In tracing the changes in how 'evidence' is read throughout history, Weizman teases out the recent shift of emphasis from the 'truth' of a witness's account to that of the material evidence, or 'forensic architecture'.²⁶ He argues that personal testimonies, while bringing 'histories of violence and abuse into the public domain', also disclose 'the limits of the frame by which historical accounts foreground individual victims rather than collective action'.²⁷ In the face of the incapacity of language or images to disclose trauma, it is the object which is called upon to evidence the acts of war. Here the materiality of *Study for a Monument*, laid out as a form of forensic evidence, comes to the fore. In enlarging and anthropomorphising plants native to Iraq, at the confluence of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, Akhavan blurs the lines between object and witness, plant and human life, trauma and testimony. In this layering of histories – fictional and real, of ruins, of trauma, of the very beginnings of language – and in the impossibility to disclose pain through voice or image, there arises a pause, a space to feel the trauma and pain of others. These are sentient objects, bodies in ruins.

23 E. Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza*, London: Verso Books, 2011, p.100.

24 *Ibid.*, p.104.

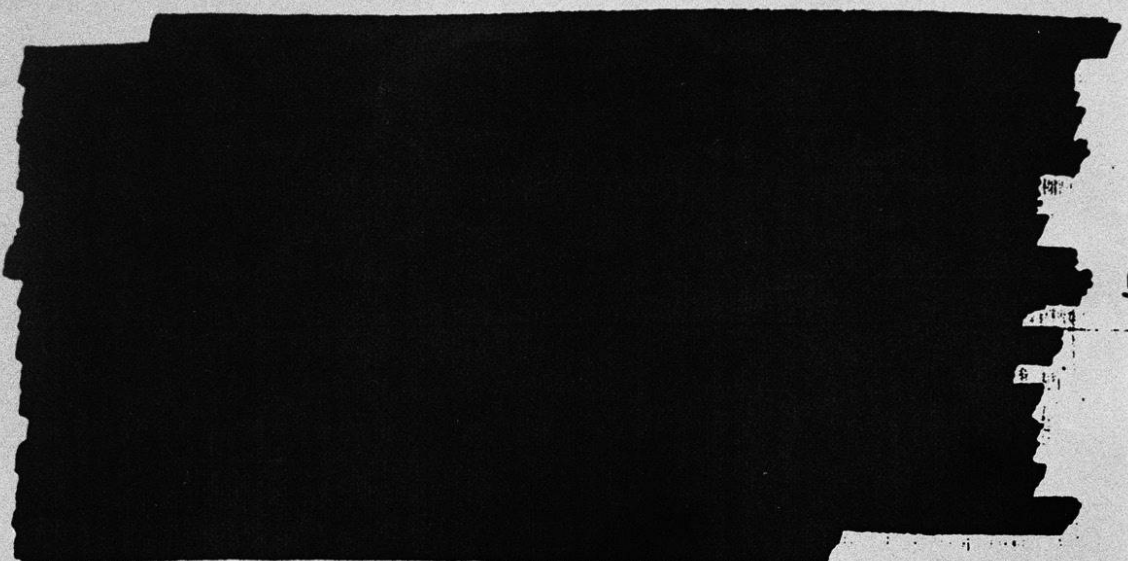
25 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

26 Forensic Architecture is the name of the research agency that Eyal Weizman leads at Goldsmiths, University of London. See <http://www.forensic-architecture.org> (last accessed on 3 July 2016).

27 E. Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils*, *op. cit.*, p.113.

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CounterIntelligence: A Glossary of Doubled Agency

– Charles Stankieveh

Guideposts for the dim, replicate half-world where counterintelligence raises deception to the second and third power.

– ‘Observations on the Double Agent’, *CIA Studies in Intelligence* journal, 1962

Do keep in the shadow, and remember the shadow moves.

– Canadian Army training pamphlet, 1940

The following glossary contemplates the intersections of art and military intelligence communities, presenting case studies that explore the hidden gestures and strategic deceptions of the shadow world. Navigating a theatre of double agents and the duplicity of objects that oscillate between art and artefact, the question arises: not only what is the *subject*, but how does this subject shape *subjectivity*? In thinking about the poetic contra the paranoid, one must pass through Paul Klee’s theory of making the invisible visible and into the field of secret epistemology, which understands that decoding the image is sometimes not as important as realising that the spectacle of the image itself serves to hide what matters most.

Anthony Blunt, Sir

During World War II, Cambridge University art historian Sir Anthony Blunt (1907–83) worked as a spy for the British counterintelligence Security Service, popularly known as MI5. After the war he was knighted and held several prestigious positions including

Surveyor of the King’s Pictures, Director of the Courtauld Institute of Art and paid consultant for many international museums including the National Gallery of Canada. For the latter he acquired, in 1953, the painting *Augustus and Cleopatra* (c.1630),

Charles Stankieveh uncovers the interconnected histories of art, military technology and espionage.

which Blunt had himself attributed to Nicolas Poussin, in 1938. Before Blunt, Poussin was a minor artist of no real consequence, but starting with his earliest art historical writings, Blunt lifted the painter to persona grata in the canon with a completed catalogue raisonné and a major survey at the Louvre in 1960.¹ Pieced together from factual fragments and furtive fictions, not unlike Blunt’s own secret personality, the function of a ‘Poussin’ was authored during the twentieth century in a cloud of controversy and entwined with the persona of Blunt.² At the nexus of this controversy one could investigate a double Anthony: one in the narrative of the painting and one in the narrative surrounding the painting.

Serendipitously, the classical iconography in the work of art foreshadowed the modern double agent, or inversely: ‘When causes cannot be repeated, there is no alternative but to infer them from their effects.’³ Two key clues. First, if we believe Blunt and take this image to represent a meeting between the conquered Cleopatra and Emperor Augustus, then we notice immediately that the third person in the triangle of power is absent: Marc Antony, the

1 From the very beginning of his published research essays, Blunt wrote on Poussin, and the painting *Augustus and Cleopatra* was his first public attribution. See Anthony Blunt, ‘Poussin’s *Et in Arcadia ego*’, *The Art Bulletin*, vol.20, no.1, 1938, pp.96–100; and A. Blunt, ‘A Newly Discovered Poussin’, *Apollo*, vol.27, no.160, 1938, pp.197–99. Blunt was by no means the first to write on Poussin; Walter Friedländer was the first modern scholar to write on the painter, in 1914, and started Poussin’s catalogue raisonné of drawings, but Blunt finished the five-volume work. Most importantly, the Louvre exhibition was a watershed moment for Poussin scholarship and popularity, resulting in several subsequent books edited and written by Blunt: *Exposition Nicolas Poussin: Mai-juillet, 1960* (exh. cat.), Paris: Édition des Musées nationaux, 1960; *The Paintings of Nicolas Poussin: Critical Catalogue* (exh. cat.), London: Phaidon, 1966; *Nicolas Poussin*, New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1967.

2 While an enormous body of literature exists around Blunt (articles, plays, novels, pulp fiction, films, memoirs, etc.), there are few measured and comprehensive accounts. Miranda Carter’s *Anthony Blunt: His Lives* (London: Macmillan, 2001) has been critically received as the best attempt at portraying a character with many secret lives.

queer lover of Cleopatra and adversary of Augustus.⁴ It is the absence and yet ghost of Antony that complicates love and creates a political body. Perhaps one can draw a parallel to another queer Anthony: Sir Anthony Blunt, who was publicly outed as a homosexual by the magazine *Private Eye* in 1979 as part of a case for his treachery and proof of duplicity.⁵ Second, the key to the painting is yet another element in between Augustus and Cleopatra, this time, however, it is not a lack but rather the present object of exchange. What is it that Cleopatra delivers to her conqueror Augustus – what is the motivation for the event and also the secret to the tableau?

In 1938, Blunt posited the theory, based on the narrative told by Cassius Dio, that the object is a pouch of love letters between Cleopatra and Julius Caesar that bear witness to Augustus's uncle formerly holding Cleopatra in good graces.⁶ Of course, the contents of the pouch remain a mystery. (Forensic X-rays of the painting cannot tell us more about its contents.⁷) A year after discovering the painting and starting his career at the Warburg Institute, the war interrupted Blunt's academic life. Among Blunt's portfolio of tasks as a spy at the Ministry was the development and management of operation XXX, or TripleX. It would seem Blunt shifted his analysis of pouches in paintings to an analysis of pouches in reality. Blunt's XXX programme devised a way to secretly intercept diplomatic pouches in transit which were supposed to have immunity from police and custom officers' search and seizure rights.⁸ Furthermore, one of the first tasks conducted by Anthony Blunt as Surveyor to the King's Pictures (the title for curator of the royal family's art collection) was a discrete mission in 1945 to recover the private letters of the British monarch in fractured post-War Germany.⁹ The clandestine recovery of information was not a new practice for Blunt and, while it might seem odd for an art curator, it is illustrative of his double identity.

By the 1970s, cracks started surfacing publicly in the dual identities of Poussin's painting and Blunt himself. In 1971, the National Gallery of Canada revoked Blunt's attribution of the painting to Poussin, demoting it to an unknown Italian painter. (Blunt would hold firm to his 1938 conjecture to the end.) This crisis of identity paled in comparison to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's parliamentary pronouncement, in 1979, that revealed Sir Blunt was a double agent for the Soviets since the very start of his career as an art historian at Cambridge – casting a blow to the legitimacy of both his 'intelligences'. The British intelligence community already knew for decades that Blunt was part of the Cambridge Spy Ring, but Blunt had strategically negotiated immunity and secrecy in exchange for revealing information (a gambit that ultimately proved politically useless for the Ministry). In a 1979 BBC press conference a few days after Thatcher's announcement, he tried to contextualise his actions as motivated by 1930s anti-Fascist impulses and a deep loyalty to his friends. Without remorse he read from a prepared statement: 'This was a case of political conscience against loyalty to country, I chose conscience.'¹⁰ In the end, Blunt has remained an enigma, posing more questions than answers. Specifically, the question remains of whether he was such an ambitious curator because of

3 I use the term 'serendipitously' in reference to Carlo Ginzburg's etymological tracing of the word in his essay about the Morelli Method and its precursor Giulio Mancini, doctor to the Pope and possibly the first connoisseur, who wrote during the 1920s in Rome on art, including on Poussin at the exact time and place Blunt conjectured the painting was produced. See C. Ginzburg, 'Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method', *History Workshop*, no.9, Spring 1980, pp.22-23.

4 Antony's contemporary Cicero writes of Antony's disgraceful youth and intimate relations with Curio, who was married to Fulvia, who in turn eventually married Antony. Cleopatra originally married Julius Caesar, but after his assassination married Antony, with whom she had twins. Plutarch's biography of Antony in his curiously titled *Parallel Lives* also recounts Antony's queer sexuality and provided a narrative source, along with Cassius Dio's history, for Blunt's interpretation of the painting. See Plutarch, *Parallel Lives* 2; and the second of Cicero's *Orations*.

5 It is important to remember that homosexuality was not decriminalised in the UK until as late as 1967, and even then only partially. Blunt's intelligence contemporary and war hero Alan Turing (1912-54) was chemically castrated for his sexual orientation. Art historian Luke David Nicholson has attempted to parallel the lives of Poussin and Blunt using queer theory, see his 'Anthony Blunt and Nicolas Poussin: A Queer Approach', unpublished PhD thesis, Concordia University, Montréal, 2011.

6 See Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 51.12.1-3. Blunt also suggests the pouch could be an inventory of the treasures owned by Cleopatra to be bequeathed to her conqueror. See Plutarch, *Parallel Lives* 78; and A. Blunt, 'A Newly Discovered Poussin', *op. cit.*, p.199.

7 Radiographs of the painting were made in 1976 at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

8 Diplomatic pouches are a reciprocal international convention between sovereign nations to 'permit and protect free communication [which] may employ all appropriate means, including diplomatic couriers and messages in code or cipher'. United Nations, 'Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations', 1961, article 27. For the publication of the source documents that Blunt passed to the Russians, and one of the only official (though leaked) admissions of the TripleX programme's existence, see Nigel West and Oleg Tsarev, *TRIPLEX: Secrets from the Cambridge Spies*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009, p.20; for the description of the TripleX programme and Blunt's role, see M. Carter, *Anthony Blunt: His Lives*, *op. cit.*, pp.273-74.

9 *Ibid.*, pp.311-19. Blunt actually conducted three different missions for the royal family to post-War Germany, recovering letters, jewels and other valuables. At least on one trip 'Blunt travelled back with a sealed packet which he instructed MFA&A must not be opened by Customs'. *Ibid.*, p.316.

10 Broadcast on BBC 1, 20 November 1979.

Augustus and Cleopatra, c.1630–50, oil on canvas, 145 × 195.2cm. Courtesy and © National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa



his passion for art, or because his superlative professionalism was the perfect cover for his intelligence career. More generally, his narrative questions straightforward notions of agency, authorship and attribution that resonate beyond his particular circumstances.

Archive

Flies in the Archive. Brazilian flies that typo Buttles into Tutttles. Or was it Tutttles into Buttles?¹¹ Flies that turn into Files. Files in the Archive. If the word ‘file’ comes from the word ‘string’, what red threads simultaneously cut and weave through the archive? Michel Foucault wrote that the archive is the ‘general system of the formation and transformation of statements’, but a nuanced reading of an archive is not only a connecting of the dots between the files to create a system as imaginary as Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (1972) but also an understanding of what is *not* included in the archive and why.¹² It is always important to remember: the archive is not inherently good, just as the museum is not inherently good, but often associated with the mausoleum, for example by Theodor Adorno or Robert Smithson.¹³ Those who hold power have the choice to exclude, erase and redact the information they decide not applicable to the construction of truth. An archaeology of the archive does not relate analysis to geological excavation, but it sometimes does refer to sifting through the layers of redacted ink.¹⁴ Nor is the archive always backwards looking; it can be that which forges the future in times of conflict, from the original Ark of the Covenant, to the battle of Jericho, to the ‘open archive’ of the current Israeli Government Press Office.¹⁵ Moreover, ever since IBM’s punch cards processed Jewish people for internment in World War II, the archive has approached a labyrinth (nearing the infinity of a Jorge Luis Borges story) where, by today’s autocorrect algorithms, the words ‘banal’ and ‘bane’ are as close as a typo.¹⁶

11 Terry Gilliam’s classic dystopian film *Brazil* – shot fittingly in 1984 – begins with a fly that a bureaucrat swats and kills, resulting in the carcass falling into a printer and jamming the mechanism so that an arrest order is mistakenly created for a Buttles instead of a Tuttle. The rest of the film proceeds as a nightmare based on a case of mistaken identity, reminiscent of Kafka’s *The Trial* (1925).

12 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (1969, trans. Alan M. Sheridan Smith), New York: Pantheon Books, 1972, p.130.

13 See Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Valéry Proust Museum’, *Prisms* (trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber), Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1967, p.175. See also ‘What is a Museum? A Dialogue between Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson’ (1967), in Robert Smithson, *The Collected Writings* (ed. Jack Flam), Berkeley: University of California, 1996, pp.43–51.

14 For an interesting consideration of geological excavation and memory in contrast to Michel Foucault, see ‘Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson’ (1970), in *ibid.*, pp.242–61.

15 See Nathalie Casemajor’s analysis of the state’s aggressive flooding of the public domain as a digital strategy to write history: ‘Framing Openness: The Digital Circulation of Israel’s National Photographic Memory’, *tripleC*, vol.12, no.1, 2014 pp.286–98.

16 See Edwin Black, *IBM and the Holocaust: The Strategic Alliance between Nazi Germany and America’s Most Powerful Corporation*, New York: Crown Books, 2001.

Avant-Garde

By the turn of the twentieth century, the term ‘avant-garde’ shifts from its military origins in the Middle Ages to an aesthetic badge normally worn by a man no less macho. Originally signalling a company of soldiers on the outer fringe and thus the first to scout and encounter the enemy, it was metaphorically applied to artists venturing into new aesthetic territory. While the term’s double meaning finds its paragon in the Italian Futurists, who celebrated the aesthetics of war in the trenches of noise and the radiating machines, there is a more complicated crossover between the roles of artist and spy in pastoral landscapes, tranquil seascapes and sunset city skylines. Military scouts and spies since the first records of conflict have travelled the landscape and made sketches of enemy positions and architectural renderings of fortresses.¹⁷ Before the *plein-air* fashion of painting, spies undertook their gaze not only from under the cover of a tree’s shadow but also under the cover of the personality of landscape artists.¹⁸ It is no surprise then that artists were often accused of espionage during times of conflict, from Pierre-Auguste Renoir, suspected of spying on the Commune of Paris in 1871 while painting on the banks of the Seine, to the confiscation of a 1917 Cubist portrait of Igor Stravinsky by Pablo Picasso, which officers on the Italian-Swiss border mistook for a military map.¹⁹ Popular spy fiction had created a hysteric paranoia during World War I, and since photography had not yet comprehensively supplanted drawing as the means for rapid documentation, the artist as observer and image-maker was a prime suspect for surveying and disseminating sensitive information.

This military suspicion was compounded by a growing cultural misunderstanding of modern art. From the depiction of visual perception in Impressionism to the fracturing of the space-time continuum in Cubism, artists moved further and further away from modes of realism, thus widening the trench between the popular understanding of what an artist should create and the sceptical sketches on canvas. Echoing the ignorant confiscation of Picasso’s portrait, Frances Stonor Saunders points out that by the mid-twentieth century, and particularly during the witch-hunts under US senator Joseph McCarthy, not only the artist but modern art itself was under trial through proclamations such as “‘ultramodern artists are unconsciously used as tools of the Kremlin” and the assertion that, in some cases, abstract paintings were actually secret maps pinpointing strategic United States fortifications’. The fury culminated with such accusations as: ‘Modern art is actually a means of espionage.’²⁰ It is here that the history of art and intelligence tradecraft take divergent paths, a split exacerbated during the Vietnam War, when the artistic community sided with the counterculture movement and against the military-industrial complex.²¹

Conceptualism

Art historians such as Max Kozloff, Eva Cockcroft and, later, Serge Guilbaut have marked the shift of power in the art world from Paris to New York with the birth of Abstract Expressionism – what some see as the first uniquely ‘American Art’.²² But such a shift in power across the Atlantic occurred in all areas, from economics to intelligence. While one field was not dependent on the other, the birth of American Art coincided with that of the US Central Intelligence Agency, formed in 1947. Infamously, ex-CIA officer Thomas W. Braden admitted in his 1967 confession, ‘I’m glad the CIA is “immoral”’, that the CIA secretly funded the arts as ideological warfare against communism on a variety of fronts, funding touring symphonies, art shows and the academic journal *Encounter*.²³

Cultural managers of powerhouses such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York had significant ties to the US secret services, often sharing roots in the close-knit Ivy League

17 Ulrike Boskamp provides a good sweeping historical account of the mistaken identities between spies and artists in ‘Spion als Künstler als Spion’ (‘Spy as Artist, Artist as Spy’), in *Fabian Reimann: Amateur* (exh. cat.), Leipzig and Hannover: Spector Books and Kunstverein Hannover, 2013, pp.57–72.

18 See Allain Manesson Mallet, *La Géométrie pratique*, vol.3, Paris: Anisson, 1702, p.8.

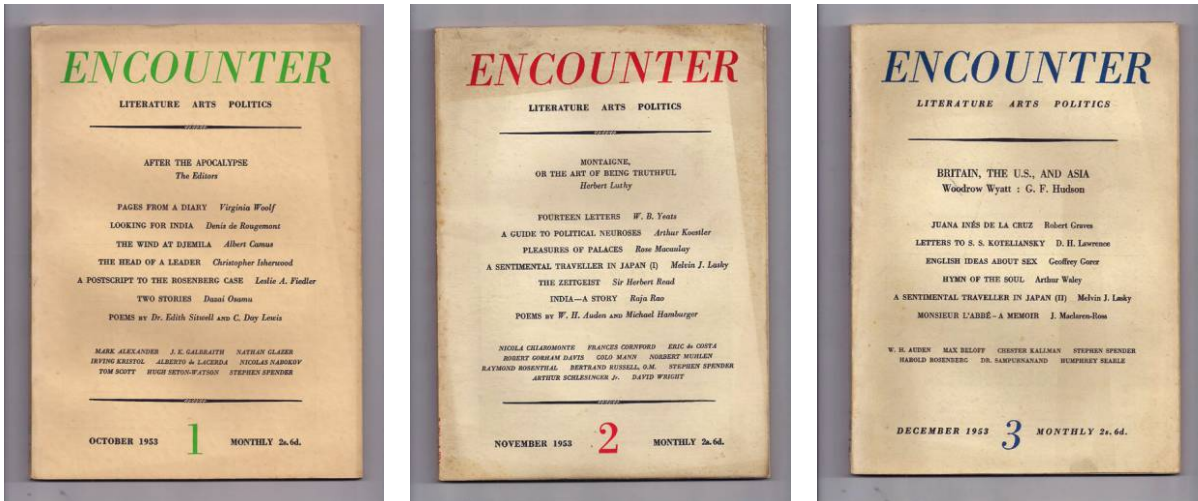
19 See James Fox, “‘Traitor Painters’: Artists and Espionage in the First World War, 1914–1918’, *The British Art Journal*, vol.9, no.3, 2006, p.63; and Carina Nandlal, ‘Picasso and Stravinsky: Notes on their Friendship’, *COLLOQUY: text theory critique*, vol.22, 2011, p.86.

20 Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, London: Granta, 2000, p.253.

21 Dwight Eisenhower coined the term ‘military-industrial complex’ in his farewell address of 17 January 1961.

22 See Max Kozloff, ‘American Painting during the Cold War’, *Artforum*, vol.11, no.9, May 1973, pp.43–54; Eva Cockcroft, ‘Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War’, *Artforum*, vol.12, no.10, June 1974, pp.39–41; and Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (trans. Arthur Goldhammer), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

23 Thomas W. Braden, ‘I’m Glad the CIA is “Immoral”’, *Saturday Evening Post*, 20 May 1967, pp.10–14.



Covers of *Encounter*, issues 1-3, 1953. Collection of the author

community. In 1952, the US government established a secret agency, the National Security Agency (NSA), devoted to the future of warfare – that is to say, the immaterial age of information. Interestingly, parallel to the intelligence community’s modernisation, American Art underwent its own ‘dematerialisation’ (to cite a term first used by Oscar Masotta and extracted by Lucy Lippard).²⁴

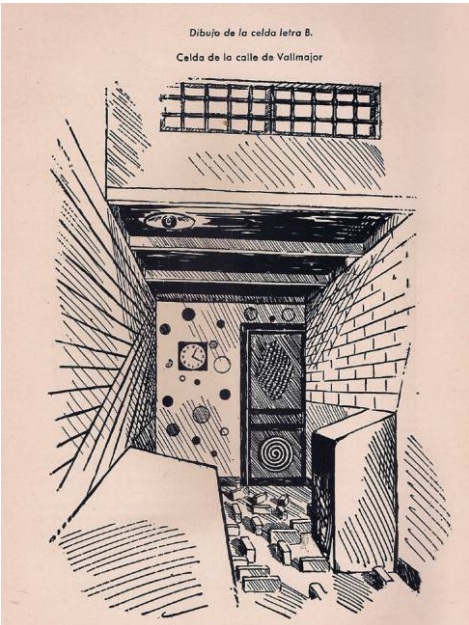
Circumventing the gallery-based market strategy (at the time at least), Conceptual Art dealt with ideas and information as the primary means of production and reception, foreshadowing the way in which the exchange of information today defines everyday life, economics and geo-politics. Joseph Kosuth attempted to define ‘Art as Idea as Idea’ (1966) through the use of reproductions, language and objects; more radical still, Robert Barry believed ‘A SECRET DESIRE TRANSMITTED TELEPATHICALLY’ (1969) was possible as the end game of art – a dream not only bypassing the fetish of the art object, but even traditional surveillance wiretapping.

Counterculture

Buckminster Fuller defected from the counter-attack of game theory into the counterculture of the World Game. At the birth of the Cold War, Fuller was hired to collaborate with the US Department of Defense and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Lincoln Laboratory to build the outpost architecture that would house the nodes of the future networked continent of North America.²⁵ Concerned that Soviet bombers flying over the Arctic ice cap and bombing major urban centres were the greatest danger facing North America, in 1951 a think tank devised an electromagnetic curtain across the Canadian Arctic, which turned an indigenous *nomad’s* landscape into a colonial *no-man’s* territory and a military theatre into a video game.²⁶ To shelter the radio equipment of this Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line, Fuller designed the rigid geodesic radome, a design that is still used to cover radio antennae at military bases in the Arctic and beyond, as well as at intelligence stations such as the Royal Air Force Menwith Hill in the UK and various NSA sites around the globe.²⁷ By 1967, the geodesic dome had acquired enough cultural status that it started to shift from a synecdoche of military and industrial invention into an ideological icon. Built for the utopic Expo 67 in Montreal as a showcase of Americana (including a large Dymaxion Map painting by Jasper Johns alongside Apollo space artefacts and photographs), Fuller’s epic geodesic dome for the

24 See Pip Day, ‘Locating “2,972,453”: Lucy R. Lippard in Argentina’, in *From Conceptualism to Feminism: Lucy Lippard’s Numbers Shows, 1969–74*, London: Afterall Books, p.78, note 5.
25 See Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996, especially chapters 2, 3 and 4.
26 For an analysis of military colonialism in the Arctic, see my *Magnetic Norths: A Constellation of Concepts to Navigate the Exhibition* (exh. cat.), Montreal: Galerie Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, 2010; and ‘Magnetic Anomalies in the Arctic: Colonial Resource Extraction, Meteoric Cults, and the Rare Earth Age’, in Nadim Samman and Boris Ondreichka (ed.), *RARE EARTH* (exh. cat.), Berlin: TBA21 and Sternberg Press, 2015, pp.82–94 (see pdf online for erratum).
27 See F. Robert Naka and William W. Ward, ‘Distant Early Warning Line Radars: The Quest for Automatic Signal Detection’, in *Lincoln Laboratory Journal*, vol.12, no.2, 2000. This highly technical essay, recounted by the engineers who built the DEW radar system, includes a very good appendix, ‘Appendix B: Rigid-Space-Frame Radomes’, pp.200–03.

US pavilion became the symbol of a shifting era. As 1960s counterculture grew increasingly critical of the military-industrial complex, the network of the geodesic dome – along with Fuller’s World Game – became the blueprint for the architecture of the Drop City commune in Colorado and the distribution model of *Whole Earth Catalog* subscribers.



Double Agent

Double agents, or intelligence assets who work for two opposing agencies, are tricky, often impossible-to-control personalities. Since their very premise is to play the ambiguity over who controls them, the reality of who is working for whom is often never clear, merely a game with a fuse destined to run out.²⁸ A rare species, such agents have existed since the earliest records of military strategy; even Sun Tzu’s fifth century BCE *Art of War* includes the double agent as one of five types of spy.²⁹ Based on the schism of identity (and often more than just in two), the paranoia of an embedded double agent within an agency also causes the snake to swallow its tail, as the power of surveillance normally directed towards the enemy turns inward to cannibalise its own body in search for the mole hiding in a *mise en abyme*. While famous spies took on the role

of curators and artists like Sir Anthony Blunt in the 1940s and the KGB’s Rudolph Abel in the 1950s, the art did not always remain in the circulation of the artworld.³⁰ French double agent Alfonso Laurencic not only played both sides of the Francoist-Republican struggle in 1930s Spain, he also extracted the paranoia out of Surrealism for real psychological warfare. It came to light in a 1936 court document that he used Bauhaus and Surrealist aesthetic theories to design torture chambers and prison cells.³¹ This included optical illusions, clocks that ‘melted’ by constantly changing time, shifts in lighting conditions and architecture devoid of expected and functional angles.

Drone

The birth of polyphony was in the reverb of the drone. The earliest Western technique to move toward polyphony consisted of a countermelody improvisation sung over a plainchant. Due to the large, vaulted space of Gothic cathedrals, reverb and resonant tones echoed as drones, thus creating the foundation for music. By the thirteenth century, a particular drone technique called ‘basilica’ was used to describe when one singer held a continuous note while another sang over the top.³² As the dominant form of power of the period, the Church propelled the most advanced technologies, amongst them the prototype of the multimedia spectacle: the organ Mass with stained-glass-filtered light rays colliding with the smoke machines of the swinging censers. In an era before steam power and combustion, the overpowering spectacle of an organ Mass would have been unlike anything else a citizen would have experienced – the lower drones of the pneumatic machine rumbling the basilica sustained by the power of the Pope.³³ But not all drones were purposeful. A continuous sounding of a pipe organ caused by mechanical defect was called a ‘cipher’ – a word we normally associate with secret writing. A third meaning of the word defines an entity without will and

Alfonso Laurencic, prison-cell design, c.1930s. From Ministerio de la Gobernación, ‘Apéndice I al Dictamen de la Comisión sobre ilegitimidad de poderes actuantes en 18 de Julio de 1936’. Collection of the author

28 See the declassified guide published internally for CIA intelligence controllers: F.M. Begoum, ‘Observations on the Double Agent’, *Studies in Intelligence Journal*, 1962, pp.57–72.
29 See Sun Zi, *The Art of War* (trans. Victor H. Mair), New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, chapter 12.
30 German artist Fabian Reimann has created two installations and two publications based on the biographies and popular culture around Blunt and Abel.
31 See Ministerio de la Gobernación, ‘Apéndice I al Dictamen de la Comisión sobre ilegitimidad de poderes actuantes en 18 de Julio de 1936’, Barcelona, 1936.
32 Paul Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p.84.
33 I owe the insight of the sonic power and territorial reach of the Cathedral’s acoustic radiance to a conversation with my mentor R. Murray Schafer when I was his teaching assistant in graduate school in 2005. For a comprehensive theory from the thinker that coined the term ‘soundscape’, see his classic *The Tuning of the World* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977).

which does the bidding of others. Today, the most technologically advanced extension of power across the pastoral territory is again a drone; but this time it is not the cipher of an organ, but rather the drone cipher under the encrypted remote control of a video-game player who in turn is under the direct bidding – without due legal process – of the executive power of the state.

Encryption

In the early 1990s, encryption technology was the exclusive domain of military intelligence organisations like the NSA. However, with the birth of digital communication and e-commerce, academics and entrepreneurs realised encryption needed to go mainstream. The US administration and the NSA battled to limit civilian and corporate encryption, crying that effective encryption would make snooping more difficult. Plans to provide back-door access to commercial encryption were supposedly thwarted through the argument of free competition in an increasing international market – the logic being that limiting the encryption strength of consumer products would undercut the value of US products. Still functioning under a Cold War mentality, the US government made the export of strong encryption illegal to minimise the enemy’s access, while allowing US citizens to defend their constitutional rights to privacy. Technically, digital encryption was classified under export laws as a munition; just as Lockheed Martin would need permission to sell fighter jets, so would Lotus 1-2-3 accounting software need approval, under the same legal code. Within this so-called first ‘crypto war’ rose an unlikely player: Philip Zimmermann. Not a top scientist participating in the peer-review world of Stanford, nor an NSA mathematician secretly working in the black epistemological hall of mirrors at Fort Meade, Zimmermann was an anti-nuclear activist and amateur coder. His role was not so much in developing the theory of public-key encryption (the standard for most online exchanges of encrypted information), but in making it available to the masses. In 1991 Zimmerman uploaded his source code to the internet, violating export laws, and lawsuits followed. In a second round of anti-government protest responding to the ludicrous and overzealous censorship of what Zimmermann thought was a basic right – that the same privacy of correspondence attributed to classic mail letters should be attributed to email letters – he published a book. But his book was not a manuscript arguing for his side of the story, instead it was a strategic gesture: *PGP Source Code and Internals* (1995).³⁴ The book’s 933 pages are exclusively composed of the computer code printed in Optical Character Recognition (OCR) type. Henceforth, all one needed to do was rip out and scan the pages and one had the computer programme – circumnavigating the encryption export law because, technically, the book was just a book and could be seen as a piece of writing under the expression of free speech. Zimmermann, essentially as a political gesture more than a practical plan, bypassed an archaic law that was being used to restrict new technology by successfully using an even more archaic technology: the book based on moveable type, circa 1455, became the book of moveable export, circa 1995.

Language Games

‘What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence’, wrote Ludwig Wittgenstein at the end of his major treatise, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921). He later went on to develop his theory of language games, published posthumously in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). In between formulating his two major treatises, Wittgenstein built his sister’s house in Vienna from 1926–28.

A *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the house was entirely designed by Wittgenstein, from the master plan down to door handles and locks. Metaphorically, *the key* to the passage from a logical ordering and picture of the world as seen in the blueprint of the *Tractatus* to the pragmatic navigation of language games is literally *the key* to the Haus Wittgenstein – that small object whose purpose is to open and close spaces, lock and unlock social engagements. Arthur Danto in 1964 used Wittgenstein’s theory of language games in his seminal essay ‘The Artworld’.³⁵ Arguing for an ‘interpretive model’ of aesthetics, a transcendent concept of art is pulled out of the museum and back into the world of the artefact; or inversely, as Alfred Gell asked in his anthropological essay ‘Vogel’s Net’, why not consider hunting traps as conceptual art?³⁶

34 Philip Zimmermann, *PGP Source Code and Internals*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995.

35 Arthur Danto, ‘The Artworld’, *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol.61, issue 19, 1964, pp.571–84.

36 Alfred Gell, ‘Vogel’s Net’, *Journal of Material Culture*, vol.1, no.1, 1996, pp.15–38.



Key to Haus Wittgenstein, designed by Ludwig Wittgenstein, c.1926-28. Collection of the author

Danto ends his classic essay by defining the value of this new useful art, and in doing so he returns to the classic tale of Hamlet, and particularly the role of the famous scene in which the play-within-the-play is revealed as a mousetrap designed to catch his uncle. Here art is a play, a dangerous game, Danto argues, where ‘as a mirror held up to nature, [it] might serve to catch the conscience of our kings’.³⁷ Today the most important keys are not to our houses; rather, they are the ones that lock and unlock our virtual lives: bank

accounts, email, computers, social networks.³⁸ Such keys reduce our language games down to single civilian passwords that define our subjectivity in direct contrast to the single key search terms typed by NSA officers. The social network exhibitionist versus the dragnet of an overzealous intelligence machine.

Psychedelics

‘Just say know.’ A mantra of the countercultural movement as articulated by Timothy Leary, fired Harvard professor, drug evangelist and far-out prophet of rebelling against the Man, Uncle Sam.³⁹ While there are art historical precursors to installation art, such as El Lissitzky’s *Proun Room* of 1923, psychedelics fuelled the 1960s.⁴⁰ ‘Happenings’ in ‘Environments’ by Allan Kaprow and USCO, as well as the new genre of expanded cinema, blurred reality boundaries supplemented with a pharmacological breakdown of all systems: patriarchy, government and the academy. In a time before research ethics boards existed, psychological experiments ranged from Leary’s clinical trials at the university to his ‘Time Chamber’ safe space at home.⁴¹ Leary ended up in prison but didn’t let the walls of Folsom keep his mind from expanding. In 1974 he self-published the book *Terra II: A Way Out, The Starseed Transmission*, which included, in binary code, a message to aliens. In the arena of the Cold War, the earth had finally been completely colonised, and the only unknown places left were *outer* and *inner* space. Dr John C. Lilly, a biologist who studied dolphin language as a test case to establish a baseline theory of communication with extraterrestrials, developed the most extreme form of immersive environment: a sensory-deprivation water tank to amplify psychedelic experiences.⁴² But not all psychedelics were taken by choice in order to increase one’s knowledge. Ken Kesey, author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962) and the other main character fostering a critical party-art scene in Leary’s era, was exposed unwittingly in 1959 to the CIA’s MKULTRA programme.⁴³ One of the darker elements of the CIA’s programme occurred from 1957–64 at McGill University in Montreal, where Dr Donald Cameron experimented with LSD to reprogramme people’s minds. Patients going into the Allan Memorial Institute at McGill were often diagnosed with minor issues such as anxiety or post-partum depression, but after three months of LSD-induced coma and other techniques that the CIA (aggressively) called ‘coercive’ strategies, it was found ‘patients’ (read prisoners) entered states of psychological ‘regression’ – in other words, entered a childlike state, even confusing their interrogators as their parents.⁴⁴ Cameron’s experiments

37 A. Danto, ‘The Artworld’, *op. cit.*, p.584.

38 While I disagree with Boris Groys’s understanding of how the internet works, the accurate observation that our subjectivity is externalised in our digital passwords comes from one of his lectures: ‘Documents, Constellations, Prospects’, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 18 March 2013. Similar technical misunderstandings of networks and algorithms occur in his DOCUMENTA13 notebook, as do similar brilliant observations on the failures of technology to manifest democracy, see B. Groys, *Google: Words beyond Grammar – Google: Worte jenseits der Grammatik*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011.

39 ‘Just Say Know’ is from Timothy Leary’s 1998 foreword to the second edition of his classic *The Politics Of Ecstasy* (1968). In his new polemic, he subversively made a pun on Nancy Reagan’s ‘War on Drugs’ slogan ‘Just Say No’, from the 1980s.

40 While several factors combined to establish the genre of ‘installation art’ in the 1960s, the *Proun Room* in Berlin is usually the first cited example in the Western tradition of a single immersive work. See, for example, Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, New York: Routledge, 2005, p.8.

41 See James Nisbet, *Ecologies, Environments, and Energy Systems in Art of the 1960s and 1970s*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014, especially chapter 2.

42 John C. Lilly, Lambros D. Callimahos et al., ‘Communication with extraterrestrial intelligence’, *IEEE Spectrum*, vol.3, no.3, 1966, pp.153–63.

43 James Nisbet, *Ecologies, Environments, and Energy Systems in Art of the 1960s and 1970s*, *op. cit.*, p.53.

44 John Marks, *The Search for the Manchurian Candidate*, New York: Times Books, 1979, pp.140–50.

might have ceased in 1964, but by that time his ‘theory of coercion’ had been established and directly codified in CIA documents, such as the *KUBARK* counterintelligence manual

While famous spies took on the role of curators and artists in the 1940s and 50s, the art did not always remain in the circulation of the artworld.

for interrogation, drafted in 1963, which defined ‘the principal coercive techniques [as] arrest, detention, the deprivation of sensory stimulus, threats and fear, debility, pain, heightened suggestibility and hypnosis and drugs’.⁴⁵ The titles of some CIA coercive strategies included: The All-Seeing Eye, Spinoza and Mortimer Snerd, The Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing and, most tellingly, Alice in Wonderland.⁴⁶ Lamentably, the CIA

Director Richard Helms ordered the destruction of all MKULTRA files to wipe out the existence of the unethical experiments. Fortunately, however, some documents were filed in the wrong place and discovered a few years later, thanks to the Freedom of Information Act.⁴⁷

Redaction

Trauma, the radical cut in reality that is beyond anticipation, is defined as such because it does not fit within the structure of the subject’s world. Trauma is always doubled. Trauma-as-black-hole compresses the subject against the event horizon. Never able to reach the hidden core or escape to warn another, it is this event as the source of trauma that the subject revolves around and around, repeating a fragmented narrative in limbo. Subject. Thrown under: *subject*. Trauma is doubled not as event but rather reproduced in the failure to communicate the original traumatic event. A 1925 notion of the unconscious in Sigmund Freud’s note about the ‘Mystic Writing Pad’: a child’s writing game that allows surface erasure of a message, but permanently records all marks on a soft pad underneath the surface.⁴⁸ The old espionage trick: revealing a message whose traces were left on a previous top sheet of paper by lightly shading the debossed page below. The Freedom of Information Act of 1967: intended to lift the veil of secrecy and reveal the inscriptions in the permanent record while keeping the US government accountable for its actions, both as a historical record of past events and promises of future exposés. Redaction strategically counteracts the accountability of the record, leaving back holes as scars in the text prohibiting the trauma from surfacing. Whole documents, released but fully redacted, leaving only the header ‘Secret’ or ‘Confidential’, bury evidence in an empty gesture of transparency.

Site (Specific, Non + Black)

Starting in the 1960s, American art retraced the path of Manifest Destiny by ‘going West’. A new breed of artists, ambitious and not yet at the centre of the New York scene’s power play, explored the landscape as the new space of physical production – not as *plein-air* painters creating visions of the landscape but through engaging with pay dirt itself. Lawrence Wiener set off explosives to blow pits in the ground of California; Michael Heizer dug zigzagging ditches, reminiscent of war trenches, in the Nevada flats; Donald Judd renovated a World War II-era POW camp built by the US Army in Texas into a personal museum; and ex-CIA pilot James Turrell flew over most of the US until he found a location to construct a starlight observatory at Roden Crater in Arizona. Supposedly exiting the white-cube ideology critically identified by Brian O’Doherty, site-specific art rebelled against the artificially neutral walls of the gallery to engage with a history of place or geography of locus. The question is, to what degree were these gestures ideological? How opportunistic were they? Were these artists trying to escape the institutionalised art market of New York, and the control of galleries,

45 CIA, *KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation*, July 1963 (declassified January 1997), p.103. Contrary, I’m sure, to Dr Lilly’s hopes, his research into sensory deprivation chambers was influential to the KUBARK programme alongside the contracted research conducted illegally at McGill. See *ibid.*, pp.87–90, 116, note 26.

46 *Ibid.* pp.67, 75–76.

47 Henry Giniger, ‘Montreal Hospital Pays Woman Who Sued Over C.I.A.’, *The New York Times*, 16 May, 1981. Canadian artist Sarah Anne Johnson’s grandmother was the patient and plaintiff mentioned in this article. Johnson has repeatedly returned to the family trauma in her large-scale installations, sublimating her grandmother’s experience into a multifaceted long-term project that recreates the multiple rooms of a doll house at human scale.

48 Sigmund Freud, ‘A Note Upon the Mystic Writing Pad’ (1925), *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol.21, 1 January 1940, pp.469–74.

or were their macho moves simply requiring a larger canvas? Today Donald Judd's Marfa attracts pop stars and playboys. Lucy Lippard, once an important voice in supporting site-specific land art, says: 'I argue now for the nearby, a micro-view of land and art, grass-roots connections rather than macro pronouncements. In fact, I've come to the reluctant conclusion that much land art is a pseudo-rural art made from a metropolitan headquarters, a kind of colonisation in itself.' Or the bumper-sticker version: 'Land Art is for city people.'⁴⁹ Robert Smithson and his understudy Gordon Matta-Clark possessed a keen sense of the paradox of site-specific earthworks and the headquarters of the art world. Their respective *Partially Buried Wood Shed* (1970) and *Splitting* (1974) articulated a sense of the problematic aspects concerning the power gestures of working at such a grand scale. Smithson, in particular, developed the language to articulate parallel to Conceptualism the idea of the 'Non-site'. Here the link between the remote locations away from the gaze of the spectator is articulated, connecting the site-specificity of the earthwork and the non-site sculpture in the gallery. What does it mean to offshore the production of art while cashing in on the value, when few see the jetty spiralling beyond reach? Today artists and organisations like the Center for Land Use Interpretation travel to remote locales to take photographs of military outposts and secret military prisons, returning with documents to display in galleries, creating a Trinity of Sites: Site-specific, Non-site, Black-site.⁵⁰

Shadow

The theatre ... not only destroys false shadows but prepares the way for a new generation of shadows, around which assembles the true spectacle of life [...] And for the lovers of realism at all costs, who might find exhausting these perpetual allusions to secret attitudes inaccessible to thought, there remains the eminently realistic play of the double who is terrified by the apparitions from beyond.

– Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, 1938⁵¹

The Witch of Endor's summoning of Samuel's shade for King Saul in the Old Testament is the first example in the Western canon of the shadow underworld. From the beginning, the shadow played the role of secret intelligence, predicting the fall of kings. Samuel prophesied Saul's demise in battle the following day with the Philistines.⁵²

X-Rays

The establishment of the Chemical Laboratory of the Royal Museums in Berlin in 1888 was a milestone moment in the analysis of cultural artefacts for their authenticity and attribution.⁵³ Wilhelm Röntgen invented radiography in 1895 and already within a year his former student Walter König X-rayed an oil painting. Documentation of the forensic analysis of artworks began, however, in 1914, when Alexander Faber registered a German patent for the application of radiographic analysis to the examination of paintings.⁵⁴ Eventually the method spread to Amsterdam and Paris, and by the 1930s it was implemented into museum infrastructure and then at academic institutions, including the newly minted Courtauld Institute for Art under the technical eye of Stephen Rees-Jones, the long-time director of the institute's laboratory under Sir Anthony Blunt.⁵⁵ X-rays were first conducted to look under the skin of the paint to see traces of earlier versions of a painting, or of a

49 Lucy R. Lippard, *Underminings: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West*, New York: The New Press, 2014, p.88; and 'Location/Dislocation', keynote lecture at Creative Time Summit, New York, 10 October 2013.

50 Is not the US military's Trinity Site in New Mexico, the earth's first nuclear explosion, the ground zero and ultimate implosion of this triangulation: a one of a kind geographic site that was originally secret but today an empty space memorialised for public tourism?

51 Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double* (1938, trans. Mary Caroline Richards), New York: Grove, 1958, p.54.

52 See I Samuel 28:3–25.

53 See Maria Filomena Guerra, 'Archaeometry and Museums: Fifty Years of Curiosity and Wonder', *Archaeometry*, vol.50, no.6, 2008, pp.951–67.

54 See Richard F. Mould, *A Century of X-rays and Radioactivity in Medicine: With Emphasis on Photographic Records of the Early Years*, Bristol: Institute of Physics Publishing, p.96. See also the best contemporary overview of the history of radiographic analysis, published as a technical bulletin by the National Gallery, London as a precursor to the current techniques used there: Joseph Padfield, David Saunders, John Cupitt and Robert Atkinson, 'Improvements in the Acquisition and Processing of X-ray Images of Paintings', in Ashok Roy (ed.), *National Gallery Technical Bulletin*, vol.23, 2002, distributed by Yale University Press.

different painting altogether (also known as *pentimenti*, Italian for repent). Originally called ‘shadowgraphs’, radiographs are not the only invisible wavelengths that can peek behind Parrhasius’s curtain. Researchers also analyse works of art with infrared rays that penetrate the surface layer of paint and reflect off the underdrawing – paint being more translucent than graphite to the long waveforms of infrared. Under such analysis, a work’s authenticity can often be determined, since more corrections and underdrawings signify a working-through of process typical to an original.

On a larger canvas, archaeologists scan the earth as an image, searching for anomalies in the landscape that might signify ancient ruins, or the origins of culture. Terraformed geological strata below the surface disrupt or fertilise an overlapping time leaving Anthropocene traces. At the turn of the twenty-first century, forensic analysis – as accelerated archaeology – gleans infrared satellite imagery testifying as evidence of hidden mass gravesites.⁵⁶ Darkness descends as ethnic cleansing entombs cultures by burying bones, hell’s heat exhumed by the coming light of the infrared. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari once said: ‘The earth has become that close embrace of all forces, those of the earth as well as other substances, so that the artist no longer confronts chaos, but hell and the subterranean, the groundless.’⁵⁷

Zone

The Soviet Occupied Zone. The Green Zone in Baghdad. The Demilitarised Zone between the two Koreas. Dubai’s Economic Exclusive Zones. William Burroughs’s and David Cronenberg’s Interzone. The Zone is the liminal territory, the space between borders, the region between reason and unreason, the buffer between fact and fiction, the transition between Fall and Rise, constantly undergoing deterritorialisation. The Zone in Andrei Tarkovsky’s epic science-fiction film *Stalker* (1979) is a particular type of site: a nebulous location demarcated by high-security military patrols and yet abandoned on the inside. Here the industrial is left to decay and the natural exudes a mystical presence that overcomes any trace of the human. Why is the Zone, the Zone? Is it the site of alien encounters (extraterrestrial or extrastatecraft⁵⁸), military experiments gone awry, or a secret dimension beyond comprehension? How does one know about the secret, that which, as Wittgenstein said, we cannot speak about? How do those inside the secret understand their own epistemology?⁵⁹ Traditionally, knowledge was produced in the order of secret religions and guilds, but after the Enlightenment, and exacerbated in the era of big data, the myth of democracy tells us information must be open-source and knowledge verified under peer review. And yet, a whole shadow world shifts in the Zone, visible at times only through the ancient art of heraldry or the fortune of leaks. Sometimes we can only circle around the shadow and thus attempt to define the trauma in our subjectivity by delimiting its perimeter like the event horizon of a black hole.

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- 55 Dr L.G. Heilbron’s analysis and conservation for the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam can be found in George William Clarkson Kaye, *The Practical Applications of X-rays*, London: Chapman & Hall, 1922, p.105; and in *American Art News*, vol.19, no.25, 2 April 1921, pp.1–12. For the results at the Courtauld, see Stephen Rees-Jones, ‘Notes on Radiographs of Five Paintings by Poussin’, *The Burlington Magazine*, vol.102, no.688, 1960, pp.302, 304–08.
- 56 See Laura Kurgan, ‘Kosovo 1999: SPOT 083–264’, *Close Up at a Distance: Mapping, Technology, and Politics*, New York: Zone Books, 2013, pp.113–28; and Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman, *Mengle’s Skull: The Advent of a Forensic Aesthetics*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012.
- 57 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980, trans. Brian Massumi), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p.339.
- 58 See Keller Easterling, ‘Zone: The Spatial Softwares of Extrastatecraft’, *Places Journal*, June 2012, available at <https://placesjournal.org/article/zone-the-spatial-softwares-of-extrastatecraft/> (last accessed on 7 September 2016).
- 59 See Judith Reppy (ed.) *Secrecy and Knowledge Production*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Peace Studies Program, 1999; and Eva Horn, ‘Knowing the Enemy: The Epistemology of Secret Intelligence’, *Grey Room*, issue 11, Spring 2003, pp.58–85.

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Silene Manissadjiana
Freyn plant collected
by and later named
after Professor J.J.
Manissadjian from
Akdağ, Amasya,
Turkey, 1892.
Courtesy the
Herbarium of Ankara
University, Faculty
of Science (ANK)

Empty Fields and Crying Stones

– Helena Vilalta

The destroyed city stretches out under the generous and dazzling sun like an endless cemetery. Nothing but ruins on every side... Nothing has been spared. All the churches, all the schools and all the dwellings have been transformed into heaps of charred and deformed stones, among which rises here and there the carcass of an apartment building. [...] A dense crowd comes to us, made up of widows, orphans, old men covered with bloody rags and soaked in tears. This is all that remains of the population of Adana. [...] At times they burst into tears, their faces drowned in an instant by such an abundance of tears that their cries and lamentations are stifled by them; their faces, tanned and dried by the sun, are furrowed with horrid wrinkles and terrible grimaces, and the entire crowd, struck by an access of grief that knows no rest, twists and turns in despair. It is impossible to imagine the sum of sorrows represented by each one of the people who make up this crowd.

– Zabel Essayan, *In the Ruins*, 1911¹

These are the words of a fugitive – a fugitive not yet fleeing death but fleeing the killing of death. An Armenian writer in her early thirties, Zabel Essayan visited Adana in the aftermath of the massacres of April 1909 in Cilicia, an ancestral Armenian land on the southern

In response to a recent exhibition at SALT in Istanbul, Helena Vilalta reflects on how to exhibit histories that remain unacknowledged.

coast of Anatolia that had fallen prey to the anti-Armenian sentiment afflicting the Ottoman Empire in the throes of its collapse. At the request of the Armenian patriarchate of Constantinople, Essayan assisted the survivors, pleading with Ottoman officials to defend the rights of Armenian prisoners

and of the thousands of orphans who endured the destruction of the Christian quarters of Adana and the surrounding villages of Cilicia. But that September, Essayan unexpectedly abandoned the Armenian delegation and returned to Constantinople, where she spent the next two years putting into writing what she had witnessed amongst the ruins of Adana.²

This was not Essayan’s first flight, nor would it be her last. Born and raised in Scutari (today’s Üsküdar), on the Anatolian shore of the Bosphorus, Essayan moved to Paris in December 1895, in the wake of the massacres of thousands of Armenians in eastern Anatolia. The killings came on the heels of the Great Powers’ call on the Ottoman Empire to reform its eastern provinces and protect Christian communities living in the region. Crippled by military losses in every corner of the empire, sultan Abdul Hamid II saw foreign intervention as proof that Armenians were the empire’s fifth column. ‘By taking away Greece and Rumania,’ the sultan said, ‘Europe has cut off the feet of the Turkish state. The loss of Bulgaria, Serbia and Egypt has deprived us of our hands, and now by means of the Armenian agitation, they want to get at our most vital places and tear out our very guts.’³ But as one German diplomat put it, the ailing empire was not ‘willing to die without exerting one last, bloody effort to save itself’.⁴ Bloody indeed: the pogroms of 1894–96 resulted in the destruction of countless villages, the death of nearly 200,000 Armenians and 50,000 orphaned children.⁵ Such atrocities did little to pre-

1 Quoted in Marc Nichanian, ‘Catastrophic Mourning’, in David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (ed.), *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, pp.103, 112.

2 Zabel Essayan’s book *In the Ruins* was first published in 1911 by an Armenian press in Istanbul, where it was reissued in 2010, also in Armenian, by Aras Publishing. It has recently been translated into English by G.M. Goshgarian as *In the Ruins: The 1909 Massacres of Armenians in Adana* (Boston: Armenian International Women’s Association, 2016).

3 Quoted in Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (1999, trans. Paul Bessemer), New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006, p.32.

4 *Ibid.*

5 See Raymond Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (2006), London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011, p.11.

vent the regime's inexorable collapse. In 1908, as the empire was faced with yet more losses in the Balkans, the revolution of the Young Turks forced Abdul Hamid II to restore the Ottoman constitution, which he had suspended in 1878, and proclaim elections. Like many fellow Armenians, Essayan hailed the new government of the Committee of Union and Progress and

The difference between exhibiting the museum's skeleton and its carcass couldn't be greater: if the former shows that modern art is defined by the museum's armature, the latter presents the remains of the museum's structure as a trace of its destruction.

by spreading false rumours of an imminent Armenian insurrection. It wasn't long before a mob set fire to Armenian dwellings and shops, with violence spreading to nearby villages. In Constantinople, Armenians stood firm in defence of the constitutional regime and their Young Turks allies; in Cilicia, the latter condoned, and possibly instigated, the massacre of 25,000 Armenians.⁷ And yet, in spite of all the atrocities she had witnessed in Adana, 'despite the gallows raised on still-smoking ruins',⁸ in 1911 Essayan addresses her Turkish compatriots as if she were a full citizen, as if the 'tribute of blood [that] had been, once more, spilled on [Armenian] land' was the sacrifice that would seal equality.⁹ As news of the Adana massacres spread in April 1909, the preface to *In the Ruins* explains, Armenians 'clung to this idea: "We too had had our victims; this time our blood flowed for our Turkish compatriots. This will be the last time."¹⁰ *This will be the last time.* Essayan's phrase is ominous, for it hints at that which she desperately strives to deny: that this will not be the last time, that blood will be spilled again. Yet there is no naïvety in her words; the pages that follow leave no doubt as to the new regime's involvement in the massacres.¹¹ Even worse, her articles for the Armenian press, published in the same year, denounce how Armenian orphans were being shipped off to Cyprus or otherwise 'Turkified'.¹² Still, the preface to her chronicle of the Adana massacres clings to the sacrificial narrative as the only means to give sense to the catastrophe, in full knowledge that the senseless looms beneath each word.

The impossibility of comprehending what she would later call 'the constitutional massacres',¹³ clearly marking their lineage in the Hamidian massacres that had preceded them, pierces Essayan's testimony. She writes of emaciated orphans and crippled bodies, of vacant eyes and maddened mothers, of villages in ashes and shattered skulls. But the repertoire of atrocities is overshadowed time and again by the unspeakability of the killings. She tries to picture this impossibility in the inscrutability of the crowd, in the survivors' blank stares, yet every effort at naming the catastrophe pushes her further away. And still, amidst the wails, sobs and howls, she trains her fugitive prose back on the boundless horror.

6 For a fine account of Essayan's biography, see Léon Ketcheyan, 'Préface', in Z. Essayan, *Dans les ruines*, Paris: Phébus, 2011, pp.7-28.

7 For a discussion of the Young Turks' involvement in the massacres, see R. Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*, *op. cit.*, pp.71-117.

8 Z. Essayan, quoted in M. Nicheanian, 'Catastrophic Mourning', *op. cit.*, p.104.

9 Z. Essayan, *Dans les ruines*, Paris: Phébus, 2011, p.29. Translation the author's.

10 Z. Essayan, quoted in M. Nicheanian, 'Catastrophic Mourning', *op. cit.*, p.105.

11 In 1909, Essayan wrote in a letter to her husband Tigrane: 'Cilicia is devastated. Everyone has the same impression. I have not yet gone to Adana but everything I have heard, everything I have been told up until now proves that the Armenians were sacrificed in totality according to a known, premeditated plan... The complicity of the current government is evident.' Quoted in M. Nicheanian, 'Zabel Essayan: The End of Testimony and the Catastrophic Turnabout', *Writers of Disaster: Armenian Literature in the Twentieth Century, Vol.1: The National Revolution*, Princeton, NJ and London: Gomidas Institute, 2002, p.228.

12 The four articles she published in *Aragats* in August and September 1911 are available online, in a French translation by Léon Ketcheyan, alongside a selection of Zabel Essayan's letters to her husband Tigrane from Adana. See <http://www.imprescriptible.fr/rhac/tome3/p1d5#n16> (last accessed on 3 July 2016).

13 Quoted in M. Nicheanian, 'Zabel Essayan: The End of Testimony and the Catastrophic Turnabout', *op. cit.*, p.218.

*And what seems irreparable and irremediable in this undefinable catastrophe are not the houses reduced to ashes, the ravaged orchards, nor is it the immensity of the number of the dead. It is the discouraging feeling that hangs around everyone's eyes, pitifully, desperately: the feeling of having been trampled collectively, of having been crushed by savage claws. These heads that had risen up humanly for an instant, in search of light and freedom, had been smashed with incomparable cruelty.*¹⁴

Cruelty here is political as well as physical. Not only did the dead of Adana fall on the still-warm corpses of Van, Trebizond and Erzurum (the towns that had borne the brunt of the 1895–96 massacres), they also fell on the promise of ethnic reconciliation. What Essayan's lament insinuates yet cannot name is the ghastly thread connecting Van and Adana, 1895 and 1909, the despotic regime of Abdul Hamid II and the nominally secular state of the Young Turks: the Ottoman Empire's determination to annihilate an entire culture. As literary critic Marc Nichanian poignantly puts it in his exegesis of this passage, 'What disintegrates people ... is therefore not extermination as such ... what disintegrates is not the deaths in tens of thousands or in millions. No, it is the will to annihilate, *because it cannot be integrated* into any psychological, rational or psychical explanation whatever. [...] What disintegrates is the interdiction of mourning.'¹⁵ Her writing in the face of such interdiction, Nichanian tells us, marks Essayan as modern Antigone.

Six years on, Essayan found herself fleeing catastrophe yet again. In Constantinople, in April 1915, she only just escaped the round-up of Armenian intellectuals that presaged the empire's brutal and definitive answer to the so-called Eastern Question. That summer, the Young Turks implemented a plan, drawn up the previous year, to 'homogenise' Anatolia and extirpate its 'non-Muslim tumours'.¹⁶ In the wake of significant Ottoman defeats in the Caucasus, they ordered mass deportations of Armenians living in the eastern provinces, disguised, in the fog of war, as a measure to prevent the Christian minorities from siding with the Russian enemy. But very soon expropriations, executions and deportations extended across the peninsula, well beyond the front, with survivors (mostly women, children and the elderly) put in convoys and transported to concentration camps along the route to the Levant and Mesopotamia – most notoriously the desert land of Der Zor, south of Raqqa – where they were systematically starved, tortured, raped and killed. It is estimated that a million and a half Armenians had been slaughtered by the end of 1916.

Seeking refuge in Sofia, Essayan began a life in flight that would take her to Tbilisi, Baku and Paris, via Tehran, Baghdad, Basra and Cairo, then back to Soviet Armenia in the 1930s. In exile, she tirelessly gathered, transcribed, edited and translated survivors' testimonies, though she would never again write about the disaster herself.¹⁷ In this turn from mourning to testimony, from literature to archive, Nichanian locates the injunction of the extermination: when all witnesses have been suppressed and any traces of death obliterated, the victims are forced to prove their own death.¹⁸

Such was the suppression of death that Essayan defied in 1911, but to which she succumbed after 1915. In a cruel twist of fate, in 1943 she fell victim to Stalinist deportations, and vanished from the record.



For Nichanian, the suppression of death is not ancillary to, but the very essence of, genocidal will. That is, the purpose of genocide is to exterminate both a people and their memory, to efface their death as well as their life by obliterating every possible witness and every possible trace. 'The erasure of the archive', he argues, 'is the destruction of that which constitutes the condition of possibility *for a destruction to become a historical fact*.'¹⁹ Paradoxically, it is the destruction of the archive that has entrapped witnesses and survivors in its vaults – its positivist logic of figures and ciphers, documents and proof, verification and refutation.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.209.

¹⁵ M. Nichanian, 'Catastrophic Mourning', *op. cit.*, pp.115–16. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁶ Quoted in R. Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History*, *op. cit.*, p.243.

¹⁷ In Baku, in February 1917, Essayan published the first testimony of 1915, co-signed with the witness and survivor Hayg Toroyan. See Z. Essayan and H. Toroyan, *L'Agonie d'un peuple* (1917, trans. M. Nichanian), Paris: Garnier, 2013.

¹⁸ Nichanian has discussed Essayan's turn in M. Nichanian, 'Zabel Essayan: The End of Testimony and the Catastrophic Turnabout', *op. cit.*, pp.187–242.

¹⁹ M. Nichanian, 'On the Archive III: The Secret; Or, Borges at Yale', *Boundary 2*, vol.40, issue 3, Autumn 2013, p.33. Emphasis in the original.

Testimonies are summoned to give evidence and calculate damages: to catalogue the instruments of torture, to weigh the dead bodies, to number the rapes. This was certainly the case for Essayan's generation; intent on making the world see what it ought never to have seen, they worked to have survivors' testimonies translated and published widely.

Today the interdiction of mourning persists in the Turkish state's continued denial of the extermination of the Western Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire. The current government has deployed the logic of the archive at will, couching its rebuttals in pseudoscientific positivism by accusing historians of inaccuracies and omissions, and claiming the fallibility of about every possible historical source, while itself suppressing evidence of the scale of the massacres and the genocidal intent underpinning them. In its attempt to restore



neo-Ottoman autocracy, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government has perpetuated the Ottoman Empire's justification of the so-called 'tragedy' as well as its repression of Armenians and other religious and ethnic minorities.²⁰ Take, for example, Erdoğan's proposal to erect 'a military museum in Gezi Park with a display of past German, French and American misdeeds' in response to the German parliament's recognition of the Armenian genocide in June this year.²¹ The knee-jerk tone belies a perverse travesty of history, for Gezi Park was itself built on the ruins of a memorial to the victims of the genocide.²²

As long as the Turkish state seeks to legitimise an exclusionary definition of Turkishness as a singular religious and ethnic identity there is little hope that it will ever recognise the genocide of 1915. Nonetheless, after a century of ruthless revisionism, Nichanian suggests that it may be time to retrace Essayan's steps from testimony back to mourning; that is, to write the disaster not to redress the wilful erasure of proof, but as defined by that very erasure. This is why

Nichanian refers to the events of 1915 not as 'the Armenian Genocide' but as *Aghed*, which translates from the Armenian as the Catastrophe. Whilst *Medz Yeghern* (great crime) and *Ak'sor* (deportation) have been commonly used since the aftermath of the genocide, *Aghed* has its roots in a markedly literary heritage. It first appeared, as a common noun, in Essayan's *In the Ruins* to designate the Adana massacres, and was later adopted by Armenian writer Hagop Oshagan to refer to the events of 1915. Since the 1980s, Nichanian has used the term as a proper noun to signal these writers' attempts to name both the event and the impossibility of naming it.²³ It is in this sense of *Aghed*, as articulated by Nichanian, that an exhibition this year at SALT Galata in Istanbul tried to conjure.²⁴ When I visited 'Empty Fields' on 19 May, a public holiday that saw Istanbul awash with Turkish flags commemorat-

Makeshift polystyrene tombs made by the activist group Nor Zartonk during the Gezi Park protests of June 2013 in Istanbul. The signs in Turkish read: 'Surp Hagop (Saint Jacob) Armenian Cemetery: 1551-1939' and 'Equality, Brotherhood, Peace, Freedom.' Courtesy Nor Zartonk

20 A lengthy article on the Turkish Government's Foreign Affairs website, tellingly titled 'Controversy between Turkey and Armenia about the Events of 1915', describes deportations as 'relocations', insists on the victims' 'guilt' and denies that any 'racist attitudes' existed in the Ottoman Empire. See <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/controversy-between-turkey-and-armenia-about-the-events-of-1915.en.mfa> (last accessed on 3 July 2016).

21 'Erdoğan backs Ottoman replica in Istanbul's Gezi Park', Anadolu Agency website, 18 June 2016, available at <http://aa.com.tr/en/politics/erdogan-backs-ottoman-replica-in-istanbuls-gezi-park-/593918> (last accessed on 3 July 2016).

22 The memorial stood from 1919 until 1922 as part of a centuries-old Armenian cemetery, which was expropriated by the Turkish state in 1939 and subsequently demolished to build today's Gezi Park. Erdoğan has long wanted to reconstruct Ottoman military barracks on the site, to the dismay of many. See Emily Greenhouse, 'The Armenian Past of Taksim Square', *The New Yorker*, 28 June 2013, available at <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-armenian-past-of-taksim-square> (last accessed on 3 July 2016).

23 See M. Nichanian, *The Historiographic Perversion* (2006, trans. Gil Andijar), New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, pp. 7-8.

24 'Empty Fields', SALT Galata, Istanbul, 6 April-5 June 2016.

ing Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, this seemed no small feat – not least due to Atatürk’s role in cementing the denial of the massacres in the founding myth of the new republic. Housed in a narrow basement gallery, the exhibition seemed particularly sombre and austere in contrast with the festive, patriotic atmosphere in the streets of Beyoğlu. On display were documents, photographs and specimens from the archive of a US missionary organisation – The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions – relating to its missionary activity in Anatolia from the 1820s to the 1930s. The crammed vitrines typical of archival shows were ditched, however, in favour of a wall-based display that activated few documents thanks to a sleek exhibition design and abundant wall texts.

Because the US missionaries worked primarily with Armenian and Greek Christian communities and reported back extensively to their headquarters in Boston, their archive provides a rare glimpse of the lives of non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire prior to the genocide. Yet the exhibition’s curator, Marianna Hovhannisyan, chose to focus less on the information the archives yield than on what remains irretrievable, namely the experiences and accounts of the Armenian and Greek communities. Mining the polysemy of the term ‘empty fields’, the exhibition showed the extermination of the Armenian population from the Anatolian land – the decimated fields – as gaps in the archive – missing data fields – and considered how these layered material and symbolic fields related to the missionaries’ own ‘fieldwork’. A fairly conventional timeline presented on an azure-blue wall, with portraits of the founding missionaries and all, introduced visitors to the missionaries’ view of the world as a field to be sowed with the Gospel. In the Ottoman Empire, this translated into the so-called reformation of the Eastern Churches (primarily the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic churches) through the construction of Protestant churches, schools and hospitals. Compiled by the archive’s current caretaker (the American Research Institute in Turkey), the organisation’s narrative intersected with traumatic events in the history of these communities, though it avoided directly naming them, nor the complex ethnic and religious divisions at the root of the Ottoman Empire’s convulsions. These were instead shown as unexplained interruptions in the timeline, most notably the brief but staggering gap between 1914 and 1923, when the American Board’s operation was suddenly reduced from 450 schools, 19 hospitals and several printing presses to virtually nothing: a reflection of the dramatic passage from the proud rebirth of Armenian culture and institutions following the end of the sultanate to its obliteration in less than a decade.

What manifested here as a discontinuity in the narrative became a linguistic gap in SALT’s digital archive. The exhibition design sought to underline the passing of the baton from one institutional voice, or archival domicile, to another: the American Board’s story gave way to a blue-on-white grid listing the data fields used by SALT to digitise the archive – a metadata system that it applies to all its archival holdings, and which frames ‘Empty Fields’ within a wider institutional project to catalogue, digitise and make public local and regional cultural archives.²⁵ The display showed that if one were to search the archive for documents in the languages used by Christian communities – Western Armenian, Armeno-Turkish, Greek and Greco-Turkish – most fields would remain blank.

The blue grid lines continued through the next section of the exhibition, overlaying a brown wall displaying archival documents from another institution, Anatolia College. Part of a comprehensive American Board compound, which included a hospital and other facilities, Anatolia College was a mixed boarding school for Greek and Armenian children in Merzifon, a small town in the central Black Sea region of Anatolia. School bulletins, management reports, graduation photographs and so on, as well as supplementary video interviews, guided visitors through the school’s activities, the missionaries’ pride now inevitably tainted by tragic irony. A particularly striking photograph shows school staff in allegorical fancy dress, each relating to either a discipline or a region represented in the school – from music to agriculture, Edinburgh to Pantos – and framed by the flags of Turkey and the US. The picture was part of a 25th-anniversary fundraising campaign to expand the campus, including the construction of a library-museum. Completed just before 1915, the museum was the

25 Marianna Hovhannisyan’s engagement with the archive began in 2014, when she was awarded a residency at SALT, supported by the Hrant Dink Foundation, to catalogue and classify the archive prior to its digitisation; she was subsequently commissioned to curate an exhibition based on her research. Though SALT might be better known internationally for its art exhibitions, the preservation, activation and publication of personal and institutional cultural archives ranging from art and design to urbanism is at the very centre of its mission. SALT’s digitised archives can be accessed online at <http://www.archives.saltresearch.org> (last accessed on 3 July 2016).

MESOZOIC TIME

CRETACEAN AGE
OR
AGE OF REPTILES

TIME
CARBONIFEROUS AGE
OR
AGE OF COAL PLANTS

PERMIAN AGE
OR
AGE OF REPTILES





1. CRETACEOUS
2. JURASSIC
3. TRIASSIC
4. PERMIAN
5. CARBONIFEROUS
6. DEVONIAN
7. SILURIAN
8. ORDOVICIAN
9. SILURIAN
10. DEVONIAN
11. PERMIAN
12. TRIASSIC
13. JURASSIC
14. CRETACEOUS
15. TERTIARY
16. QUATERNARY
17. GLACIAL
18. POST-GLACIAL
19. MODERN
20. PRESENT





brainchild of Professor Johannes ‘John’ Jacob Manissadjian, an Armenian-German botanist and teacher who was instrumental in developing the school’s interdisciplinary and experimental curriculum, focussed on the study of the Anatolian land through fieldwork. In pedagogical excursions around Merizfon, and thanks to Manissadjian’s travels across Anatolia, the school had gathered an impressive natural science collection of roughly 7,000 specimens, including fossils, minerals, pressed plants and stuffed animals, which were catalogued and displayed under Manissadjian’s guidance. But Manissadjian wasn’t able to enjoy his role as curator for long. In late June 1915, he was one of the first Armenian teachers to be arrested, though he was later spared (thanks partly to a bribe and partly to his German ancestry). Despite the efforts of the Board and the American Embassy, hundreds of Armenian teachers, students, doctors and nurses living in the compound weren’t so fortunate: most of the men and boys were axed to death and the women and girls deported after refusing to be given over to Turkish officials. They were only a small proportion of nearly 10,000 Armenians to be terrorised, plundered, abused, deported and killed in Merzifon alone during the long and dark summer of 1915.²⁶

And yet, we know that Manissadjian returned to the site of the disaster not long after. It was in Merzifon, in December 1917, that he signed the preface to the museum’s meticulous, handwritten catalogue, explaining: ‘The universal war put a stop to all scientific work, except the continuation of arranging, labelling and cataloguing the specimens.’ The detailed inventory of each of the specimens in the collection – their source, name, location, description, etc. – provided a means of embalming the museum before its imminent dispersion, as well as registering the irrecoverable loss that marked its end – the loss of Anatolia’s ancestral culture, inextricable from its flora, fauna and landscape. Seeing the bare book inside a glass case, sporting a label with the scrawled words ‘MUSEUM – CATALOGUE’, it was difficult not to think of Marcel Broodthaers’s museum fictions. The recreation of the empty museum of Anatolia College, showcasing copies of Manissadjian’s inventories organised in ‘cases’ according to the museum’s original classification and display system, didn’t dispel the likeness. Barring one butterfly drawer, there was little to see except for the museum’s taxonomy – its carcass, if you will.

Undoubtedly, the use of exhibition design in ‘Empty Fields’ to address the Catastrophe’s politics of representation was indebted to the self-reflexive language of display that

26 See R. Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History*, op. cit., pp.452–55.



Above and left:
Installation views,
'Empty Fields', SALT
Galata, Istanbul,
2016. Photographs:
Mustafa Hazneci.
Courtesy SALT

Previous spread:
Professor J. J.
Manissadjian with
his students,
Merzifon, Turkey,
date unknown.
Courtesy United
Church of Christ
(UCC), American
Research Institute
in Turkey (ARIT)
and SALT Research,
Istanbul

Broodthaers pioneered in his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section XIXe siècle* (*Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, 19th-Century Section*, 1968).²⁷ But the analogy between both museums without works only stretches so far because, crucially, at SALT the museum-in-ruins was not merely allegorical. Whereas in 1968 Broodthaers subtracted the museum's contents so as to call attention to its institutional shell or skeleton – to circulation and reproduction as the conditions of the existence of the absent works – here the staging, or monumentalisation, of the museum's frame was put to the opposite effect – to exhibit the works' absence or, to be more precise, the conditions of the specimens' disappearance.²⁸ In fact, the difference between exhibiting the museum's skeleton and its carcass couldn't be greater: if the former shows that modern art is defined by the museum's armature, the latter presents the remains of the museum's structure as a trace of its destruction.

This, I would argue, is a residual gesture of mourning – a gesture performed in two acts: first by the curator Manissadjian, in writing the catalogue of the collection he knew was lost, and later by the curator Hovhannisyan, in her display of the carcass of the museum of Anatolia College at SALT. The collection's inventory bears witness to the particular worldview inscribed in the museum: the knowledge amassed of Anatolia's native geology, flora and fauna and its classification by the school's staff and students. But in making an inventory of the collection in the immediate aftermath of the genocide, literally amongst the ruins of the museum, Manissadjian also inscribed his own failure as a witness insofar as he was only able to preserve that culture as a vestige. It is this relationship to history in ruins that marks the work of mourning in Essayan's 1911 book as much as in Manissadjian's 1917 catalogue. What is mourned is not a personal loss but a collective one: the loss of historical memory. In the interwar years, Walter Benjamin defined this experience of collective mourning as 'the state of mind in which feeling revives the empty world in the form of a mask'.²⁹ The 'empty world' to which Benjamin refers is a world 'in which history, and the narrative coherence and direction it once promised, has been shattered': seven-

27 There is, in fact, a direct link between the exhibition's critical approach to the politics of representation and institutional critique via the participation of Kontext Kunst-associated artist Fareed Armaly, who advised curator Marianna Hovhannisyan on the exhibition design.

28 Rachel Haidu has argued that Marcel Broodthaers's *Musée d'Art Moderne* (1968) exhibited the institutional conditions of modern art, namely reproducibility and circulability, in her *The Absence of Work: Marcel Broodthaers, 1964-76*, Cambridge, MA; The MIT Press, 2010, p.120.

29 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* (1928, trans. John Osborne), London: New Left Books, 1977, p.139.



teenth-century German tragic drama and its mourning for the narrative of salvation offered by Catholic eschatology, but surely also the devastated world of post-World War I Europe.³⁰ If Manissadjian's 'MUSEUM - CATALOGUE' can be said to act as a funerary mask, it is because it attempts to hold together the memory of the object lost and the history of its loss, which is also the loss of history.

Nichanian has drawn attention to the common structure of cultural testimony and the testimony of survivors – what he calls 'catastrophic testimony' – by invoking Benjamin's famous statement on the inextricability of culture and barbarism, already prefigured in his early writings on mourning. Testimony, Nichanian argues, is defined by a 'double structure, since testimony is always a testimony of culture and, at the same time, a testimony of the barbarism that proceeds with the erasure of all culture'.³¹ While Benjamin's sentence is often read as a call to consider the exploitation and violence underwriting the production of culture, Nichanian here asks us to read it in reverse, for 'any catastrophic testimony will be, of necessity, a document of culture'.³² In other words, the inscription of the disaster is itself subject to the law of the archive and its curse of political appropriation. This is echoed in the exhibition's examination of both the collection's history and the conditions of its survival. If Manissadjian tried to hold together memory and loss in anticipation of the specimens' dispersion, Hovhannisyan retraced the collection's dispersion in order to locate its few, scattered remnants and rejoin them with the memory of the Catastrophe inscribed in the museum's carcass. Though the museum's collection remained in Merzifon long after the school's closure,³³ in 1939 most of its 7,000 specimens were shipped to another American school, in Tarsus, near Adana. But lacking context, they remained 'unclaimed and covered in dust' before being dispersed yet again.³⁴ Because Manissadjian had been active in scientific and

30 Judith Butler, 'Afterword: After Loss, What Then?', in D.L. Eng and D. Kazanjian (ed.), *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, *op. cit.*, p.471.

31 M. Nichanian, 'On the Archive III', *op. cit.*, p.21.

32 *Ibid.*, p.28.

33 After 1915 Turkish authorities closed Anatolia College and repurposed it as a military hospital. It reopened in 1919, under the direction of the American Board, to mainly cater to orphans and displaced children. In 1921 most of its activities were transferred to the Greek city of Thessaloniki, where it still functions today under a new leadership. What remained of Anatolia College in Merzifon was closed down in 1939.

34 Ateş Aykut, quoted in 'Empty Fields', *op. cit.*, unpaginated.

Undated photograph taken in Merzifon, Turkey. Courtesy United Church of Christ (UCC), American Research Institute in Turkey (ARIT) and SALT Research, Istanbul

commercial networks prior to 1915, some of the butterflies and plants he collected have been preserved in collections across Europe. The over one hundred specimens kept in the herbarium of Ankara University, however, have remained unattributed, their history severed from that of the atrocities that unfolded in Merzifon. In locating these specimens and bringing them together with the history of the collection to which they once belonged, Hovhannisyan has kept alive the work of mourning that Manissadjian initiated in the immediate aftermath of the Catastrophe, and she has contemplated its afterlife.

Contemplating the afterlife of the Catastrophe implies challenging a double interdiction of mourning: the suppression of death inflicted by genocidal will and the suppression of memory inflicted by a revisionist state. Over a long trail of absences, 'Empty Fields' exposed the continuity between the brutal annihilation of Western Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire and the continued repression of religious and ethnic minorities under Turkey's democratic autocracy. Confronting the interdiction of mourning is, of course, not the same as overcoming it; it implies incessantly pushing against the limits of what can be said – philosophically, historically, politically. As Essayan wrote, it requires straining one's imagination 'beyond the limits of human imagination' and, 'despite superhuman efforts', failing time and again.³⁵ 'Empty Fields' shared the fugitive quality of Essayan's prose in that one was never quite able to grasp its object fully – just slivers of the destruction left behind in anodyne school files, and the sheer difficulty in accounting for so many gaps. In exposing these gaps as open wounds, it also recalled Saidiya Hartman's engagement with another archive of violence and erasure: that of transatlantic slavery. Reflecting on her project of writing a cultural history of slavery as a history of the present, Hartman recognises the omissions in the archive as the very parameters of her work, which she describes as an attempt to 'to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling'.³⁶ At SALT, such amplification was best captured in the image that opened and closed the exhibition: a poplar-lined field of rocks with the foreboding caption 'stones crying out'. Though the picture was taken before the events of 1915, as part of Anatolia College's effort to expand its campus, in retrospect it signifies both the opacity and the excess of the archive of the Catastrophe. While the bare stones evoke the impossibility of telling a story without witnesses, the reverberations of their lament across decades points to the incompleteness of the past. In present circumstances, I suspect that these stones' hushed cry will have been drowned out by the uproar that has followed the failed coup of 15 July 2016, the persecution of all forms of dissent bearing a frightening resemblance to the Ottomans' obsession with the empire's fifth column. All the more reason to heed the warnings of crying stones.

35 Z. Essayan, quoted in M. Nicheanian, 'Catastrophic Mourning', *op. cit.*, pp.112, 110.

36 Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *small axe*, no.26, June 2008, p.11.

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